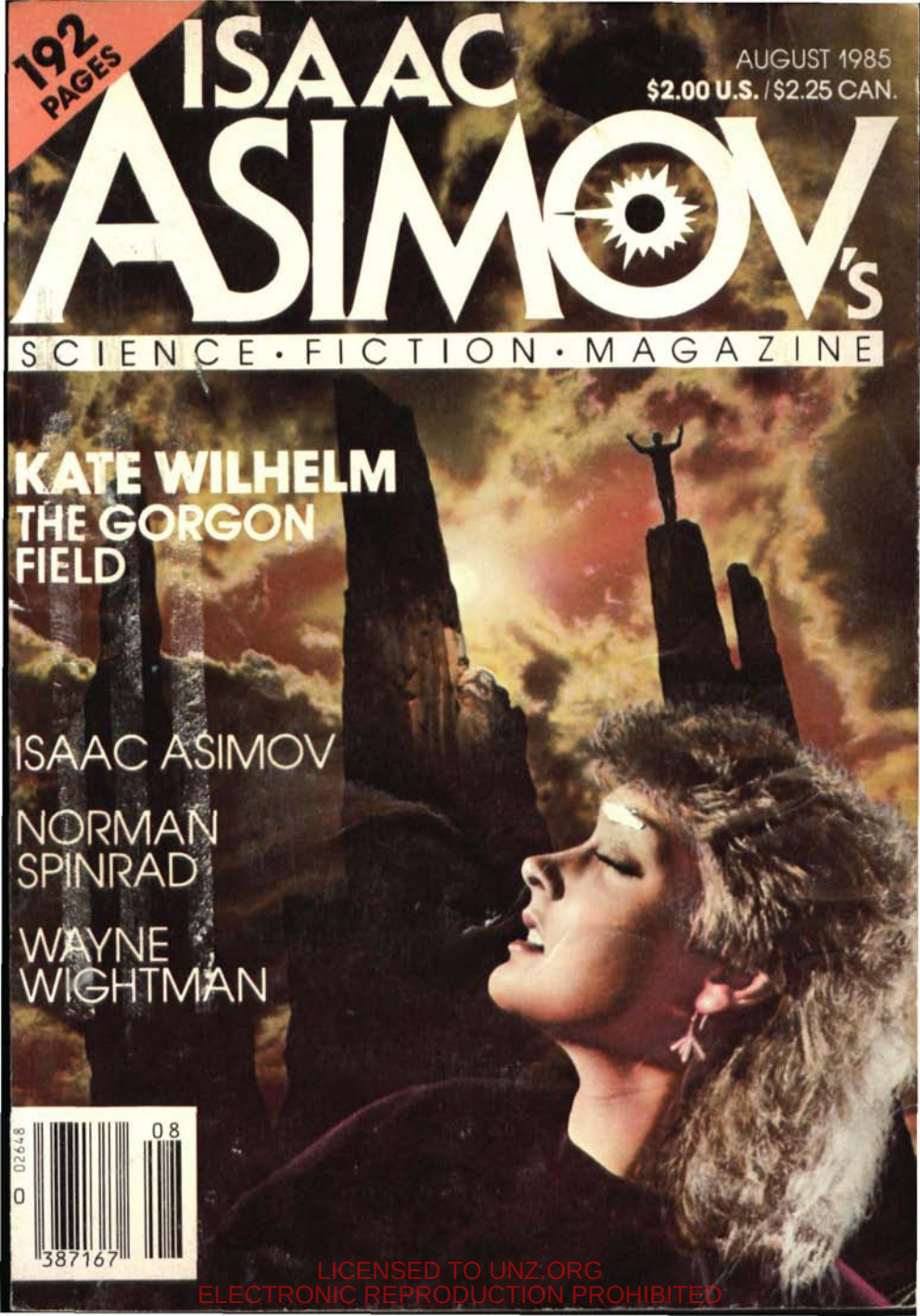

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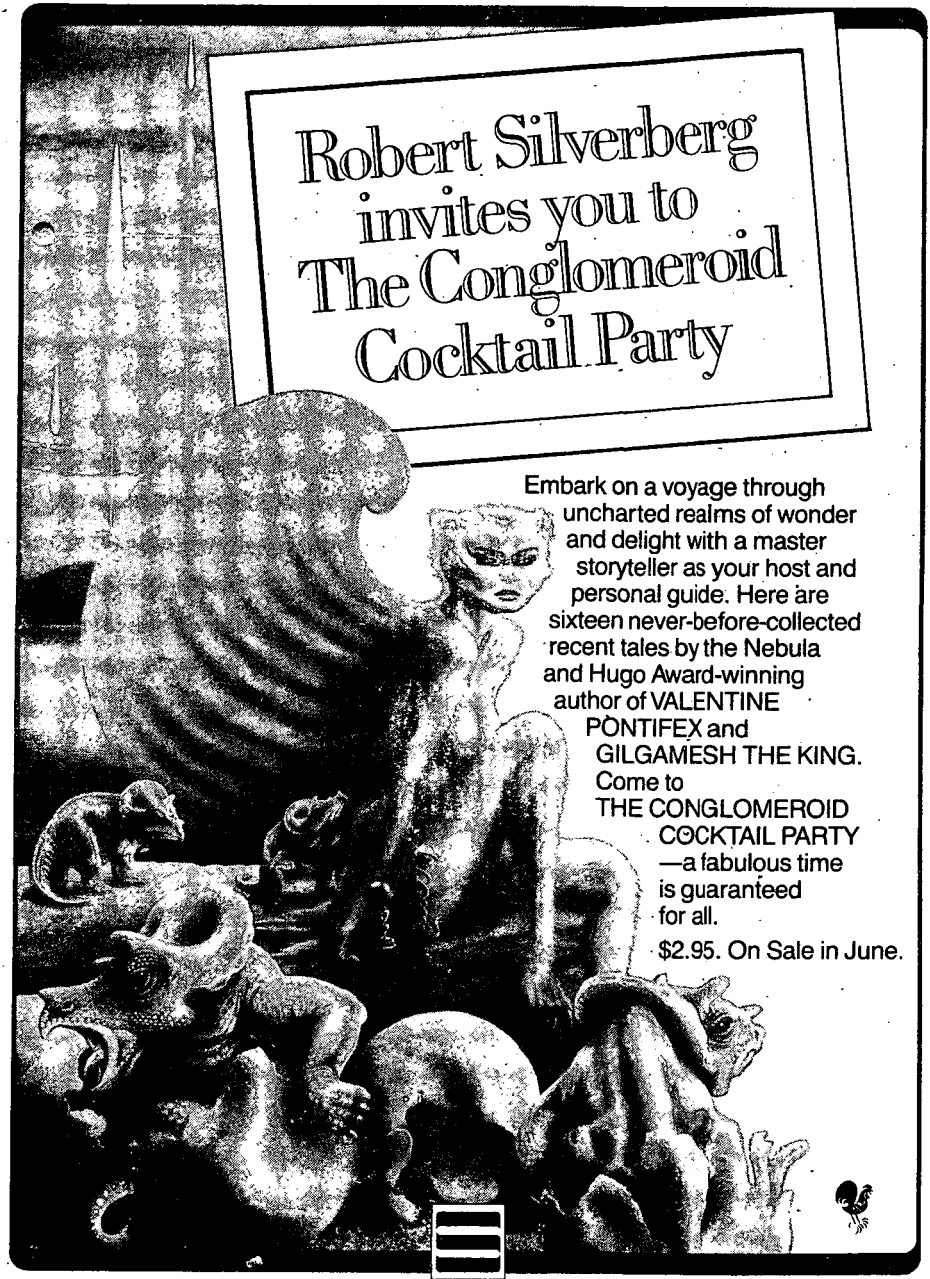
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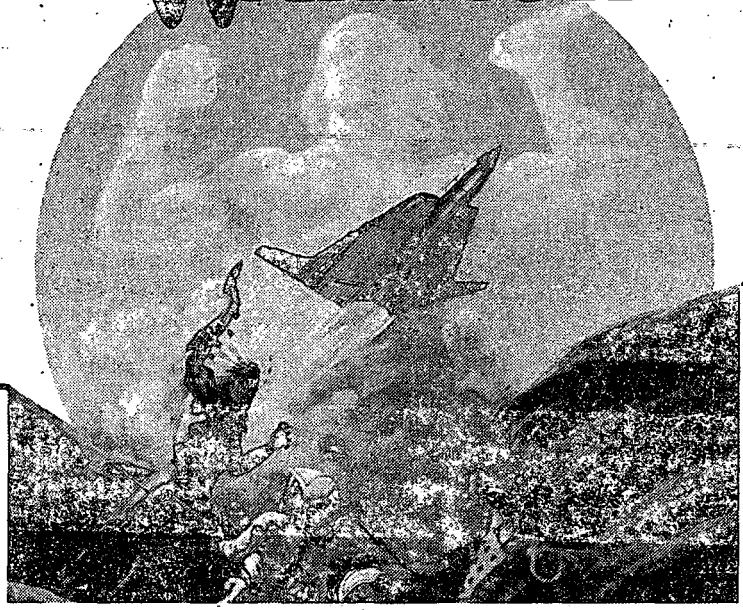

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22

116

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Vol. 9 No. 8 (whole no. 94)
August 1985
Next issue on sale
July 30, 1985

Novellas

22 The Gorgon Field — Kate Wilhelm
116 World War Last — Norman Spinrad

Novelette

98 On for the Long Haul — T. Coraghessan Boyle

Short Stories

74 Logic is Logic — Isaac Asimov
84 In the Realm of the Heart, In the World of the Knife — Wayne Wightman

Departments

4. Editorial: Plagiarism — Isaac Asimov
11 Letters
18 Gaming — Dana Lombardy
20 Inner Planets Quiz — Martin Gardner
181 Mooney's Module — Gerry Mooney
183 On Books — Baird Searles
192 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by Bradley Denton and Robert Frazier

Cover art for "The Gorgon Field" by J.K. Potter

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EDITORIAL

PLAGIARISM

by Isaac Asimov

To the ancient Romans, a "plagiarius" was what we call a kidnaper, and to steal children is certainly a heinous crime. It appears to those who work with their minds and imagination, however, that to steal one's brain-children is almost as heinous a crime, and so "plagiarism," in English, has come to mean the stealing of the ideas, forms, or words by someone who then puts them forth as his or her own.

A scientist's formulas, an artist's paintings, an inventor's models, a philosopher's thoughts, might all be the subject of plagiarism, but common usage has come to apply the term, specifically, to the theft of a writer's production.

Plagiarism is a horrid nightmare to writers in several different ways; and it is much more serious than non-writers may realize.

If a writer, for any reason, commits plagiarism, copying some already published material, and if he gets away with it to the extent of getting the plagiarized material re-published, he is bound to be caught sooner or later. Some reader, somewhere, will notice the theft. In that case, even if the plagiarist isn't sued or punished in any way, you can be sure that no editor who knows of the plagiarism will buy anything from that writer again. If the plagiarist has a career, it is permanently ruined.

You may think that such a literary thief deserves a ruined career, and certainly I think so, but copying an already published item word for word is such a sure-fire failure that only an idiot or a complete novice would do it. What about the case where someone simply makes use of the central idea of the story, the series of events it contains, the climax, the emotional milieu, and so on, but does *not* repeat it word for word? What if he uses his (or her) own words entirely, changes the incidents in non-essential details, puts it in a different setting and so on?

In that case, it becomes more difficult to decide whether plagiarism has taken place. After all, it *is* possible to get the same ideas someone else has had.

Thus, Ted Sturgeon once wrote a story which he sent to Horace Gold of *Galaxy* and which was accepted. I wrote a story which I sent to Horace Gold while Ted's story was still unpublished. There was no communication between us; we

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lived in different cities and had not exchanged phone calls or letters in months, nor had either of us discussed our stories with anyone. Nevertheless, not only did we both center our stories about a double meaning in the word "hostess," but two of my characters were Drake and Vera, and two of his were Derek and Verna.

It was the purest of coincidences, for except for the double meaning and the character-names that we shared, the stories were miles apart. Nevertheless, even the *appearance* of plagiarism must be avoided. I had to make enough changes in my story (because it was the later one received) to destroy the appearance. To do so spoiled the story in my opinion, but it had to be done anyway.

In the same way, when I am writing a story, I must be conscious that there have been other stories dealing with similar ideas or similar characters or similar events, and I must make every effort to dilute that similarity. When I wrote a story once called "Each an Explorer," I never for a moment forgot John Campbell's "Who Goes There?" and spent more time trying to avoid his story than trying to write my own. In the same way, when I wrote "Lest We Remember" (published in this magazine) I had to steer a mile wide of Keys' "Flowers for Algernon." It's part of the game.

But I haven't read every story ever written and many that I have read, I have completely forgotten, at least consciously. What if I du-

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plicate important elements of stories I have never read, or have forgotten? It's possible. I once wrote a short-short which ended with a certain dramatic climax in the last sentence. Eventually, I received a letter from another writer whose story had been published before I wrote my story and who had made use of the same dramatic climax in his last sentence. What's more, I had his story in an anthology in my library. I did not remember reading it, but I had had the opportunity to do so. The two stories, except for the climaxes, were completely different, but I promptly wrote the other author and told him that although he had my word that there was no conscious imitation, I would withdraw the story from circulation and it would never again appear in any anthology, any collection, any form whatever—and it never has.

Fortunately, the other writer accepted this, but what protection do I (or any other writer) have against the accusation of plagiarism over what is a bit of unconscious recall, or, for that matter, an outright coincidence?

Actually, very little. I rely, to a large extent, on my prolificity and my unblemished record. No one as prolific as I would seem to have to depend on someone else's ideas, and my own mental fertility is obvious to all. Secondly, I am cautious enough never to discuss my stories before they are published, nor will I listen to others who might want to discuss *their* stories. In fact, I won't even read unsolicited manuscripts sent me by strangers. They go back at once, unread.

Even so, every established writer lives under an eternal Damocles' sword of possible accusation of plagiarism. A casual reference, a small similarity, a non-essential duplication may be enough to produce such a suit. Such a suit, however unjustified, however certain of being thrown out of court, can be hurtful to an innocent writer. It is, after all, an expense. Lawyers must be paid, time must be lost and, invariably, one is urged to "pay off the kook."

But what if *you*, the established writer, have been plagiarized? That has never happened to me to the extent of publication—that I know of. To be sure, there have been pastiches of me, deliberate imitations of my robot stories, or my Black Widowers mystery stories, and so on. These come under the heading of fun. The writer who turns them out makes no secret of it, and the editor knows that it's a pastiche. Sometimes, they send the manuscript to me to ask if I have any objection. I have always given permission. Then, too, there are stories that are bound to be similar to mine in some benign way. The "Star Wars" movies have some distant similarities to my "Foundation" stories, but, what the heck, you can't make a fuss about such things.

Unpublished plagiarism is more common. An English professor once

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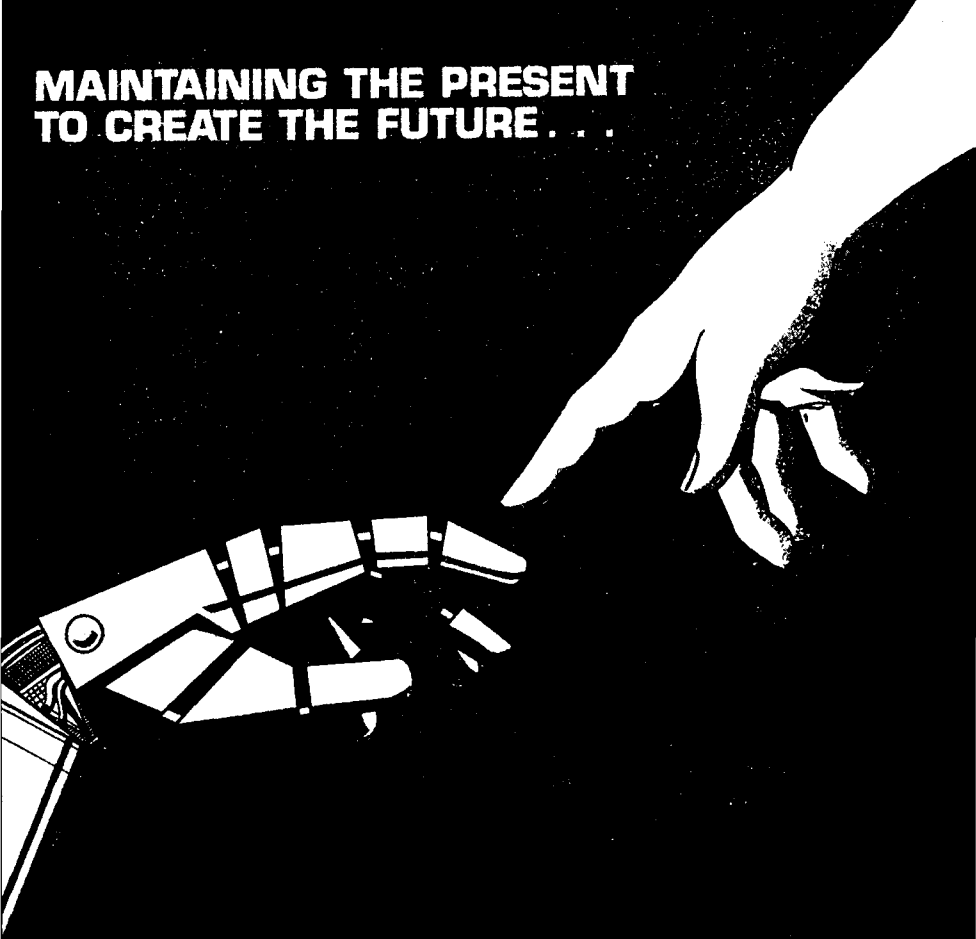

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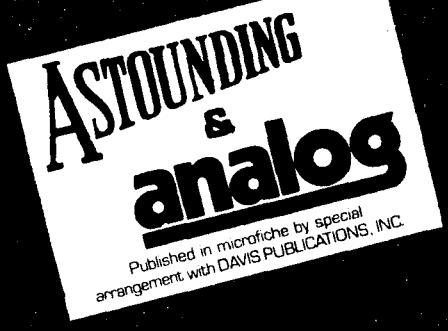

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sent me a story written by a student in first-year English. It didn't seem to her likely that the kid could have written that good a story and there were things in it that seemed reminiscent of me—like the Three Laws of Robotics. I went over the story and it was my "Galley Slave" word for word. I returned it to the professor and told her to (a) punish the student appropriately, and (b) not let me know anything about it. (I'm softhearted.)

And what if you're an editor and get stuck with some material that might conceivably be plagiarized. In the first place—is it? A completely original, non-reminiscent story is possible, but very rarely met up with. Similarities with some particular published story are almost unavoidable. However, the more similarities there are, with the same previously-published story, the greater the possibility of plagiarism. Nevertheless, it is difficult to establish certainty if the copying isn't word-for-word.

Should an editor refuse a story, however good, if there are too many similarities? Of course! Remember that I said even the appearance of plagiarism must be strictly avoided.

There is, however, a catch. An editor has not read every story that has been published. Sometimes an editor, being human, has not even read every *famous* story ever published. Or an editor has read many stories but some of them have completely gone from her mind. Such an editor may, in all innocence, therefore publish a doubtful story. He (or she) is then a *victim* and not an accomplice.

Just as honest, established writers must live, constantly, with the fear of being accused of plagiarism, or of themselves being plagiarized, so must honest, established editors live, constantly, with the fear of being victimized into publishing a doubtful story.

What does one do in such a case? One can't entirely ignore the matter. For one thing, the similarity between the new story and an older story is sure to be seen by some readers. Even if the older story is very obscure, someone will have read it and remembered it. If it is a well-known story, letters will come in heaps.

One can ask the writer of the doubtful story for an explanation. If the explanation seems unconvincing, one can avoid buying stories from the writer again. One might warn other editors in the field to be careful. And one can try hard not to let it happen again—knowing full well that there is no way of stopping *every* piece of literary prestidigitation.

It is comforting to know, however, that if an editor lets something suspicious get into print, the fact will not remain unreported for long. We can be sure, then, that if no indignant reader has written within two weeks of the appearance of an issue, we have probably committed no ghastly mistakes of this nature in that issue.

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

After reading yet another letter to the editor concerning Connie Willis' wonderful "Blued Moon," in the January, 1985, issue of *Asimov's,* I have reread the story and find my curiosity piqued once more, as it was on first reading: how did Ms. Willis decide on the town of Chugwater, Wyoming, as the setting for the story? I have the feeling she must have just picked the name off the map and is not familiar with the town itself, because, for the life of me, I cannot imagine the Chugwater I know with the kind of development she describes, even in the future. It's just too small a town.

I hope this isn't too picky a criticism of an otherwise entertaining story; I'm sure that 99 percent of your readers have never heard of, let alone been to, Chugwater, but I found it a little grating, as though something just wasn't right. It's a little enough request to hope that an author knows his setting and it's really obvious when he does: witness Edward Bryant's Wyoming-set stories.

I will conclude with my two cents worth on the content of *Asimov's* recently. I know, as should anyone, that it is never possible to please everyone; however, there hasn't been an issue yet that I haven't enjoyed the better portion of, and if there is a story I don't particularly like, I also realize that there are probably others with different tastes who will probably love it. I like the magazine and its variety and hope you will just keep it up. There is always quality and occasionally a real gem.

Katheryne Earl
Torrington, WY

It is conceivable, I suppose, that Connie invented the name and then found out it really existed. On the other hand, you mustn't insist on first-hand knowledge. Chugwater might never get itself into literature at all, if it had to wait for someone with first-hand knowledge to sell a story.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac and Shawna:

I want to thank you for keeping in mind that SF is about the ways people can change the world, and for consistently publishing stories about what's really important —stories that energize us readers to continue the struggle to keep the real world going and make it a bit better. This is a tradition that has been there since *IAsfm* began—bringing us such stories as "Enemy Mine" and "Postman"—and is basic

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to every issue. Not propaganda, not moralizing—just writing that is hard to define, since I don't know of a less "speciesistic" term than *humanistic*.

Taking the Jan. '85 issue as an example (it's pretty typical—the average issue is awfully good), there's a story about two people who can only grow when they let go of a shallow relationship; one of Pohl's fine anti-nuclear-war stories; a fable of the difference between love and possessiveness; a poem about our responsibility toward other beings; a story about love overcoming the strongest conditioning against it; one on how an archetypal force can be a monster or a lover, depending on how you relate to it; and one on how people create the relationships they need. Even the most gadgety of the lot takes an amusing look at how to combat the abuses of power—and typifies good SF as per the editorial, in that we root for the guy with the smarts.

"Quartermain" is there for token cynicism, I guess, but I could wish it had had a less obvious ending. In all the stories, the SF or fantasy content is intrinsic—you couldn't tell the same story without it—and while Bishop's poem is about science today, it clearly belongs in a science fiction publication rather than, say, *Science '85*. As for Frost's "In Media Vita," when I finished reading it, I was strongly reminded of a line from a poem by Auden, which expresses the theme of the entire magazine:

"We must love one another or die."

Millea Kenin
Oakland, CA

That's not a bad quote, although sometimes to my perhaps overly cynical eye it seems that the only thing that keeps some people alive is a plentiful supply of other people to hate.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov
and Ms. McCarthy,

I have been an avid reader of your magazine since the August '83 issue, am well into my second subscription, and have noticed an increasing number of letters from readers taking a stand for or against censorship. I have also noted that the commonest argument of those in favor of censorship is "I am a parent and do not want my teenaged son or daughter reading about all this sex and violence." I have not noticed once, however, that a teenager has taken a position on this issue.

I am fifteen years old. I was raised in a very liberal environment, the son of a college professor and an artist-schoolteacher. The only tabooed word in my upbringing was "censorship." I was allowed to read whatever I wished. This freedom did not result in my becoming a porn-freak, nor a blood-and-guts-slash-'em-up enthusiast. It led me, instead, to learn the difference between *good* literature and *trash*.

The Moral Majoritarians of this country would gladly ban our Freedom of the Press and institute a totalitarian theocracy if we ever gave them a chance. I should know—I was born and raised in the hometown of Falwell and the religious Fundamentalist cult he leads.

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If ever your policies of "if it's good, print it" changed to "if it's acceptable to the religious fanatics and everyone else, print it," you would have at least *one* less subscriber. Just as we do not allow Creationism taught in our public schools, let's not let censorship become the code of our best science fiction magazine.

Sincerely,

Jon White
Lynchburg, VA

The trouble with censorship is that it spreads. There are some objects on the newsstands and magazine racks that I would not miss if they were to disappear. However, no matter what we eliminate something of what is left would be on the edge, on the borderline, and the censors would then get after that. And finally, all we would have to read and think is how great and wonderful the censors are and we'd all die of boredom.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In your recent article on irony (*Asimov's*, October, 1984 issue) it seems you started your article, with what most people would consider an ironic statement, when you wrote, "I know nothing about the craft of writing formally, I say so myself constantly."

Most people would think that a famous writer like yourself would know everything about the craft of writing properly, thereby assuming that you would be a formal writer; however, there are at least two ways in which your statement is totally true.

The first way the statement could be true is if you were talking about the formalist movement started in Russia in 1917, led by Viktor Shklovsky and Eugeny Zamyatin. In which case, I can truthfully say, few writers know anything about writing formally, since the movement didn't last long.

The second way your statement could be true is if you were referring to classical writing; in which case you should have said classic instead of formal. In this case your statement would only be true concerning your style, since you are mainly a proletarian writer—writing for the layman. It is obvious that you know enough about writing to be a classical writer.

So was the statement meant to be ironic?

Sincerely,

Michael J. Holden
Temple, TX

Very good, but I meant my statement literally and as a message in straightforward English. I never took any classes in writing, I never read any books on writing, I never do much thinking about writing. I do *write, but only by instinct. No irony, in other words; merely truth.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov
and Ms. McCarthy:

I enjoyed the January 1985 issue of *Asimov's*, particularly "Fermi and Frost," "And Who Would Pity a Swan?," "Quartermain," and "The Spinning Kingdom."

In recent issues, and particularly this one, I feel you have clung to the present day ("The End of Life

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As We Know It," "Fermi and Frost," "Gorgonissa") and the near future ("The Final Assassin," "In Media Vita," "Quartermain"), and neglected the much further future of Mankind actually reaching the stars and beyond.

The "furthest-out" story was "The Spinning Kingdom," and that hasn't even reached any stars. All the others, even the fantasy "And Who Would Pity a Swan?," are tightly tied to the surface of the Earth.

There's a whole universe out there beyond Earth—let's see some of it.

Also: Martin Gardner's paradoxical limericks are not necessarily that. Both the "line two" and "line one" limericks are, after all, third person. If someone else is describing someone whose limericks end on line two or line one, their own can go on to the full five lines. A person whose limericks end on line one would say: "My limericks end on line one."—and so they do.

I enjoyed Tom Rainbow's articles, and was sorry to hear of his death. After your stock is exhausted, he will be missed.

Best of luck for the future,

Sincerely,

Robert Nowall
2730 SE 24th Place
Cape Coral, FL 33904

Some reviewer once complained that my writing always dealt with the far ends of the Universe and said, "Come home, Isaac, all is forgiven." So I then put together a collection of stories entitled "Earth is Room Enough" in which all the stories were set on Earth. Science fiction is science fiction wherever it is set and if you wait, you'll get your fill of space, too.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Folks,

I'll admit to some feelings of hesitance (guilt?) about writing this reply to Tom Rainbow's Viewpoint "Super-intelligence." But his ideas deserve comment.

You see, there was something I kept waiting for him to say. He almost hit it when he recognized the language problem which might interfere if some diabolical ivy league assistant professor who had sold his soul to the KGB attempted to transplant the good doctor's neurons into some soviet citizen's brain. Brain size and complexity is a necessary but not sufficient factor in the development of intelligence; *experience* is just as important.

Perhaps the pizza-brains are pizza-brains not because they have fewer neurons, or less-developed neurons, but because they have spent their entire lives doing nothing but watching soap operas and game shows. If Isaac Asimov had spent his childhood locked in a closet rather than reading science fiction (and, I suspect, anything else he could get his hands on), today he would be scratching fleas and grunting in the back ward of some home for the hopeless.

And what about the brain-matter that we apparently don't use? Is there some reason for that? Could we create super geniuses by training them to use those idle neurons? Brain-damaged patients can sometimes regain lost functions by learning to use alternate neural

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pathways. Brain cells cannot be replaced, but they can be retrained.

So maybe if we can learn how to use all of what we have, and to raise each child in the most enriching environment, we won't have to have our super geniuses wandering around with swollen crania and weakened bodies.

But then, I'm only a squirrel monkey graduate student in clinical psychology, so I don't have the answers. By the way, if any of you out there have a working De-evolvo ray, send me an order form. It would probably work just as well on recalcitrant faculty as on editors.

Abigal F. Strichartz
Amherst, NY

You're not going to get an argument out of me on heredity vs. environment. I'm strong for environment. However, I don't go for that old bromide about brain-matter we don't use. When neurologists found portions of brains that were used to receive sensation and others to control muscular action, it seemed to them that most of the brain was used for neither and was therefore "idle." Nonsense, there are many other things brains deal with than just motion and sensation.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Shawna:

I'm writing in response to the recent flurry of letters from readers/writers who are "upset" with your editorial policy, and especially the good Doctor's editorial, "Slush." Having suffered the sting of rejection, I appreciate their anger/distress—after all no one likes to be found lacking. Form letters seem to be the ultimate cold-hearted rejection.

But, if the aspiring writers really want to appreciate the task of editing, I suggest they start by enrolling in a writing course or by attending a few writers conferences. Since you don't learn how to swim or drive a car without practice and criticism, don't expect to write, which is a skill—hence the Old English term playwright, a person who fashions words in plays—without similiar effort. And for a real experience, try your hand at editing on a college magazine or newspaper (after two semesters, I developed a deep appreciation for that unsung person on the masthead, **editor**).

Also, there are several excellent books on writing in general, such as *Elements of Style*, and even some covering the basics of science fiction. They're worth reading, as are the magazines devoted to the craft of writing. Practice, persistence, postage, and patience are what separate the doers from the dreamers. Keep up the good work!

Kathryn Caro
San Diego, CA

Yes, but it's a lot easier to blame editors for not being helpful enough.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. A., et al.:

I really enjoy your magazine. I first picked it up in 1979, because of the Good Doctor's name, and have not felt compelled to write till now. I just bought the January 1985 issue. "Fermi and Frost," "The Spinning Kingdom," and "In Me-

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dia Vita" deserve special mention. The rest of the magazine was up to your usual high standards.

I find that I liked most of the stories and articles in previous issues. I'm sure that others enjoyed the few that I did not, so I will not complain. What little violence and sex I've seen has most certainly not offended me. Nor has the religious issue, I have my beliefs and you yours. If I read something that conflicts with my faith, I welcome it as a chance to reaffirm my own beliefs. To date I have found nothing in the pages of *IAsfm* to give me cause to stop buying it. Perhaps if the idea behind the magazine were to change, the humorous with the serious, I would stop buying it. I don't have a subscription, but only because my frequent changes of address do not make subscribing viable.

The main reason for this letter is that I do not like the new cover. I have waited several months to write, to see if I could get used to it, but I have not. There is no particular reason I do not like it, I simply do not find it aesthetically pleasing. Of course it does not and will not prevent me from buying it. Thank you for a wonderful magazine (despite the cover; after all it is the content that is important).

Sincerely,

Suzanne Beaulieu
7–410 Ellice Ave.
Winnipeg, Man. R3B1Y3
Canada

I'm glad you won't let your dissatisfaction with the cover stand in your way of reading the magazine. You can always tear it off, I suppose. I'll tell you something, though. I've never seen a cover that someone didn't hate.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In the February 1985 issue, you asked for help in identifying a quote used in the Letters Column.

The actual quote, according to Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, is:

You see things; and you
say, "Why?" But I dream
things that never were; and
I say, "Why not?"

—Back to Methuselah
[1921], pt. I, Act I

It is, as Ms. Goss stated, by Shaw.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Spaan

Thank you. It's the serpent in the Garden of Eden who says it. John and Robert Kennedy were always quoting it and I wonder if they knew that it was Satanic in origin (at least as far as Shaw was concerned).

—Isaac Asimov

CORRECTION

Due to a mistake in layout, the verses to "Shipwrecked on Destiny Five" by Andrew Joron (*IAsfm*, May pp.54, 55) were printed out of order. To better appreciate the poem, one should start with the line that begins "Final communiqué ..." in the eighth stanza, read through to the last line, turn to the first line, "An ocean clotted with pink algae," and read through to "Scattered along a scarlet beach."

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Dear Isaac:

As it seems unlikely that your sixty-fifth birthday will pass unnoticed within the SF community, I may as well get in on the fun. Thus, I herewith express my own reaction to your forthcoming attainment of middle age:

Every legend and myth
Praises Cordwainer Smith,
And John Campbell reaps endless acclaim.
A Pournelle or a Niven
Earns praise as a given,
But I don't know a good rhyme for "Asimov."

I'd be eager and quick
To laud Philip K. Dick,
Or commend Frederik Pohl for his fame.
I could praise to the heights
What Ray Bradbury writes,
But I don't know a good rhyme for "Asimov."

I could stand here all day
Praising Lester del Rey,
And Ben Bova deserves much the same.
But to sing *your* hosannahs
Would drive me bananas;
I blame your unrhymeable *name*.

If your name were James Blish,
Even Thomas M. Disch,
I could issue great glowing reports.
But the name you possess
Doesn't rhyme, so I guess
You might just as well change it to "Schwartz."

Wotthehell. Happy Birthday anyway.

F. GWYNPLAINE MacINTYRE
London, England

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"Bloodchild,"
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(IAsfm, June 1984)

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Dragonriders of Pern is one of the major titles in Anne McCaffrey's SF series about the planet Pern—a distant world colonized by Earthmen and inhabited by fire-breathing dragons. It's also an unusual new picture-book game published by Nova Game Designs Inc. ($12.95 at your local store, or direct from Box 1178, Manchester, CT 06040).

The great threat to life on Pern is "Thread," a space-travelling mycorrhizoid spore that devours all organic matter it touches, and once on the ground, burrows and proliferates with amazing speed.

Fortunately, Thread fall occurs only every several hundred years when a bright Red Star with an erratic orbit comes close to Pern. The early colonists were almost wiped out by the first falling of Thread on Pern. Survivors sought to control future attacks of Thread by using Pern's indigenous fire lizards, called "dragons" by the descendants of the colonizers from Earth.

These domesticated flying dragons breath fire after chewing a phosphine-bearing rock, and can jump forward and backward in time. At hatching, each dragon selects the human with whom it will be empathetically and telepathically bound for life. The dragon and its rider are the first line of defense for Pern. When Thread fall, the dragonriders fly into action, scorching the Thread in mid-air before it can reach the ground to do damage.

A group of dragons and their riders is called a Weyr. A "Weyrling" is a novice or initiate to the group. You'll encounter both in playing the game, which also identifies other ranks of riders.

This is where you enter Nova's game: Thread is falling on Pern, and you, a dragonrider, must maneuver your mount into position to scorch the invading spores before they reach the planet surface. The stakes are high and time is short.

The game consists of two 4½-by-6-inch paperback books, each containing 115 views that you would see from the back of your flying dragon. There's also two character sheets with descriptions of the maneuvers each type of rider may make, along with a section to keep track of Threadfall, damage to your dragon if hit by Thread or another flying dragon, and how many turns of flame it takes to eliminate Thread.

Unlike other games, *Dragonriders of Pern* is not competitive; you don't play against the other player. Thread is your common enemy. You and the other rider must work together as a team to defeat Thread.

To start the game, each player determines what type of dragon he'll be matched with by rolling a die (not included). Your mount could be a Green, Blue, Brown, or Bronze

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Dragon in the basic game. In addition to these four types of dragons, a Gold or White Dragon is possible in the campaign game. Bronze Dragons are huge and can sustain much damage, while smaller Blue and Green Dragons can maneuver better.

After you've determined what type of dragon you'll ride, you then name your character and start at the appropriate rank for that rider: a Weyrling can make 7 possible maneuvers; a Dragon Rider can make 11 maneuvers; a Weyr Leader can make up to 15 different maneuvers; a Weyrling Master can perform up to 17 various maneuvers; and an Old Timer can use any of the 18 total maneuver options available.

You advance or drop in rank by accumulating or losing Prestige Points earned by burning Thread in cooperation with your wingmate. Succesfully destroying Thread earns both players points—unless only one player does all the burning. In that case, both players *lose* Prestige Points (saving Pern is more important than showing off). Failure to burn Thread also results in both players losing Prestige Points. Cooperation is critical, especially when you both start as Weyrlings with a limited number of maneuvers available to you.

To maneuver your dragon towards falling Thread, you select a maneuver symbol at the bottom of the page you're currently on. Each maneuver symbol has a page number printed next to it. When you call out that page number, the other player, your wingmate, turns to that page. You turn to the page number that your wingmate announces from his maneuver selection.

This results in both players being on new pages that show the view they now see relative to each other and Thread (if visible). It's possible to lose sight of each other, run into each other, burn your wingmate (!), flame Thread, or be out of position (too far away, overshoot, or turn in the wrong direction).

There's also a time limit on your mission: Weyrlings have six turns to flame Thread and must destroy seven Threads during patrol or lose Prestige Points. More experienced riders have fewer turns to destroy the seven Threads, and Old Timers must burn a Thread every other turn.

Dragonriders of Pern takes only about ten minutes to play and is a lot of fun. After one quick game, you're anxious to start another patrol. The time limit does a nice job of conveying the sense of urgency to destroy Thread as depicted in McCaffrey's novels.

If you'd like to try something really different, that emphasizes cooperation over competition, and is faithful to a good SF series, get *Dragonriders of Pern* by Nova Game Designs.●

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *IAsfm* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 1933, Marion OH 43306.

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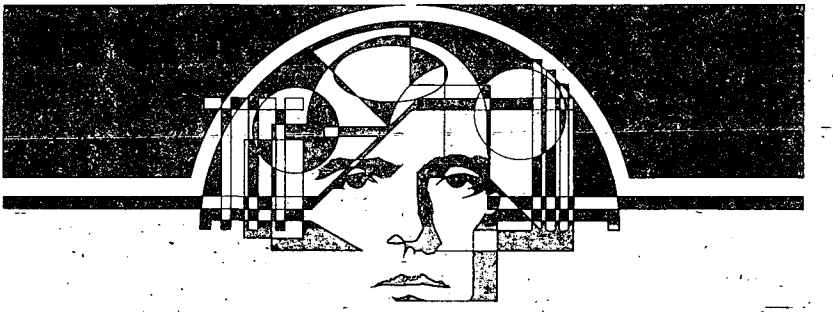
MARTIN GARDNER

INNER PLANETS QUIZ



For a change of pace this month, try your brain on these puzzling questions about the four planets that are closest to the sun.

1. Mercury. Many science fiction yarns have had as their setting the "twilight zone" of Mercury—a ring-like region of perpetual gloaming between the blazing hot side of Mercury and its freezing side of eternal night. Some notable examples: Larry Niven's "The Coldest Planet," Alan Nourse's "Brightside Crossing," Robert Silverberg's "Twilight Belt," and "The Twilight Planet" by Arthur J. Cox. Mercury's twilight zone has vanished totally from recent science fiction. Why?

2. Venus. Assume you are on the surface of Venus. The planet's thick cloud cover would prevent your seeing the stars, but somehow you know the earth is directly overhead and the sun is on the western horizon. Is the sun rising or setting? As the planet rotates, will the earth move east or west across the Venusian sky?

3. Earth. Imagine that the earth is reduced to the size of a billiard ball, with all its mountains and valleys reduced proportionately. You wipe off the salty moisture with a towel, then run your fingers over the ball's surface. Would you be able to feel the mountains and ocean basins? If the earth's orbit is drawn to scale on a sheet of paper the size of this page, would be you able to tell that the path was an ellipse?

4. Mars. I'll bet you didn't know that there are faces of two Martian monsters on a dollar bill. Of course no animal life now flourishes on Mars, so these must be creatures that inhabited that planet long before it ran out of water. To find the monsters you have to pleat the bill a certain way. See if you can figure this out before turning to p. 72.

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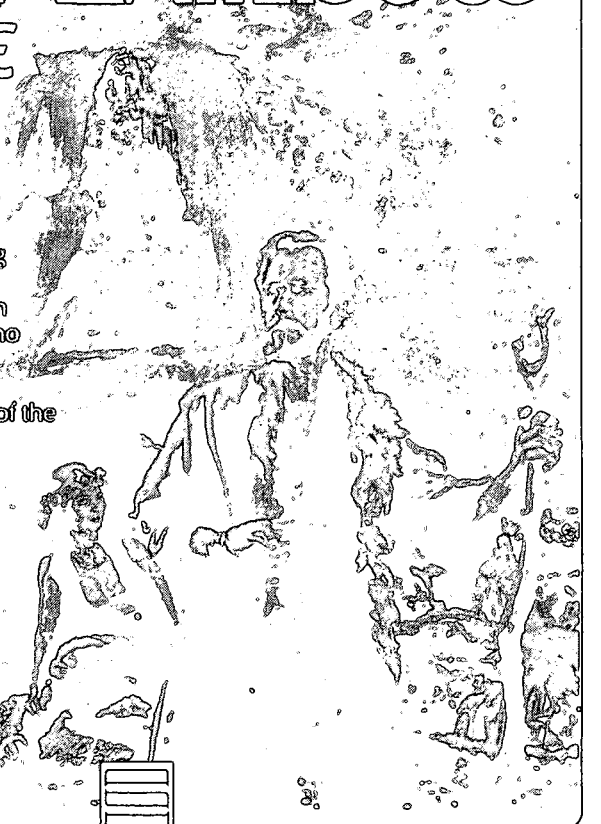
Discover the enchanted realms that lie beyond...

THE LAST RAINBOW

BY PARKE GODWIN



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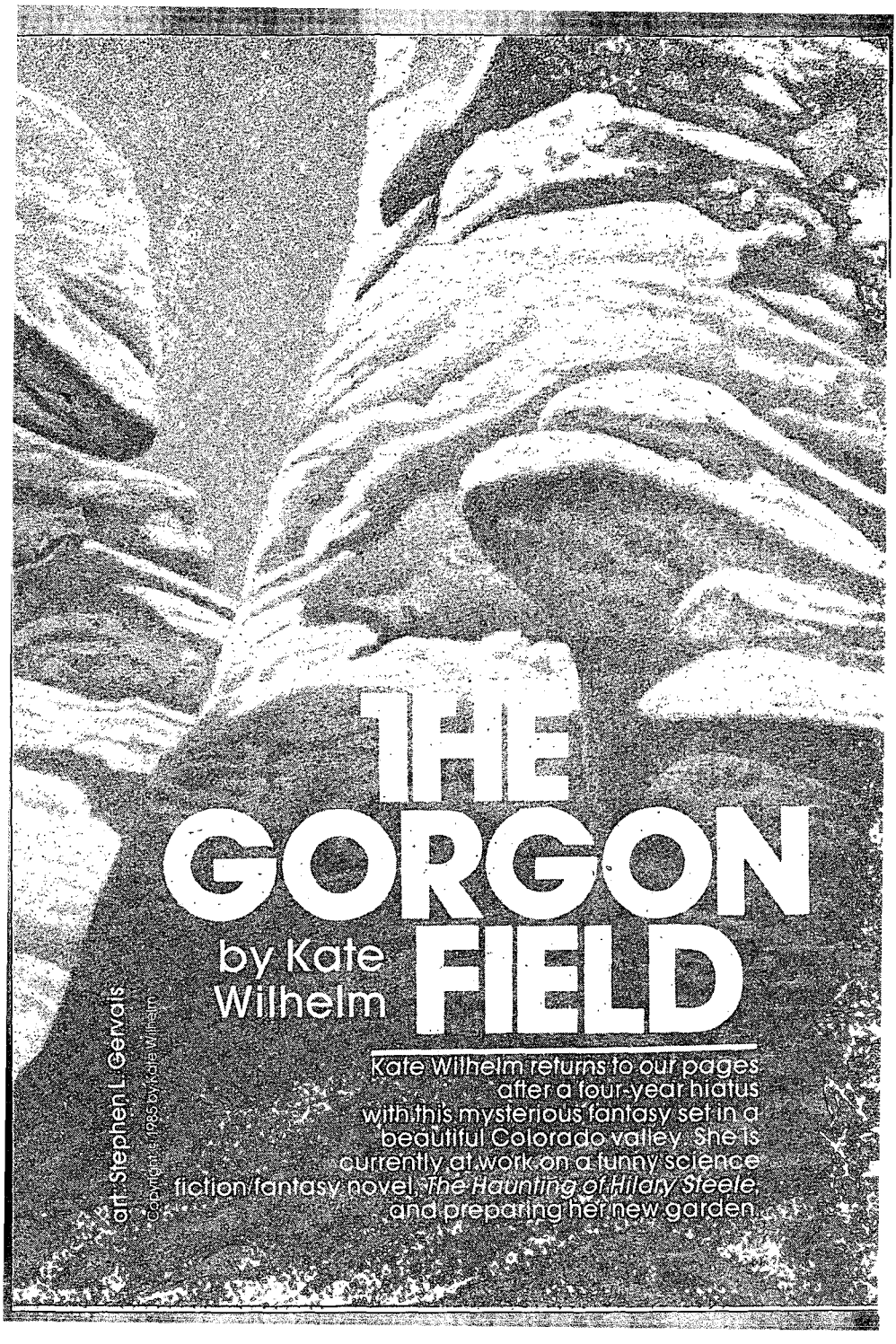

THE GORGON FIELD

by Kate Wilhelm

Kate Wilhelm returns to our pages after a four-year hiatus with this mysterious fantasy set in a beautiful Colorado valley. She is currently at work on a funny science fiction/fantasy novel, *The Haunting of Hilary Steele*, and preparing her new garden.

art: Stephen L. Gervais

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Constance took the call that morning; when she hung up there was a puzzled expression on her face. "Why us?" she asked rhetorically.

"Why not us?" Charlie asked back.

She grinned at him and sat down at the breakfast table where he was finishing his French toast.

"That," she said, pouring more coffee, "was Deborah Rice, née Wyandot, heiress to one of the world's great fortunes. She wants to come talk to us this afternoon, and she lied to me."

His interest rose slightly, enough to make him look up from the newspaper. "About what?"

"She claims we know people in common and that we probably met in school. I knew she was there, it would be like trying to hide Prince Charles, I should think, but I never met her, and she knows it."

"So why did you tell her to come on out?"

"I'm not sure. She wanted us to come to her place in Bridgeport and when I said no, she practically pleaded for an appointment here. I guess that did it. I don't think she pleads for many things, or ever has."

It was April; the sun was warm already, the roses were budding, the daffodils had come and gone, and the apple trees were in bloom. Too pretty to leave right now, Constance thought almost absently, and pushed a cat away from under the table with her foot. It was the evil cat Brutus who had always been a city cat, still wanted to be a city cat, and didn't give a damn about the beauty of the country in April. He wanted toast, or bacon, anything that might land on the floor. The other two cats were out hunting, or sunning themselves, or doing something else catlike. Brutus was scrounging for food. And Charlie, not yet showered and shaved, his black hair like a bush, a luxuriant overnight growth of bristly beard like a half mask on his swarthy face, making him look more like a hood than a country gentleman, cared just about as much for the beautiful fresh morning as the cat. Constance admitted this to herself reluctantly. He had been glad to leave the city after years on the police force, following as many years as a fire marshal, but she felt certain that he did not see what she saw when he looked out the window at their miniature farm. On the other hand, she continued the thought firmly, he slept well, and he looked wonderful and felt wonderful. But he did miss the city. She had been thinking for weeks that they should do something different, get away for a short time, almost anything. There had been several cases they could have taken, but nothing that seemed worth the effort of shattering the state of inertia they had drifted into. Maybe Deborah Rice would offer something different, she thought then, and that was really why she had told her to come on out.

* * *

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"My father," Deborah Rice said that afternoon, "is your typical ignorant multi-millionaire."

"Mother," Lori Rice cried, "stop it! It isn't fair!"

Constance glanced at Charlie, then back to their guests, mother and daughter. Deborah Rice was about fifty, wearing a fawn-colored cashmere suit with a silk blouse the exact same color. Lori was in jeans and sneakers, and was thirteen. Both had dusky skin tones, although their eyes were bright blue. The automobile they had arrived in, parked out in the driveway, was a baby-blue Continental, so new that probably it never had been washed.

"All right," Deborah said to her daughter. "It isn't fair, nevertheless it's true. He never went past the sixth grade, if that far. He doesn't know anything except business, his business." She turned to Constance. "He's ignorant, but he isn't crazy."

"Mrs. Rice," Charlie said then in his drawly voice that made him sound half asleep, or bored, "exactly what is it you wanted to see us about?"

She nodded. "Do you know who my father is, Mr. Meiklejohn?"

"Carl Wyandot. I looked him up while we were waiting for you to arrive."

"He is worth many millions of dollars," she said, "and he has kept control of his companies, all of them, except what he got tired of. And now my brother is threatening to cause a scandal and accuse my father of senility."

Charlie was shaking his head slowly; he looked very unhappy now. "I'm afraid you need attorneys, not us."

He glanced at Constance. Her mouth had tightened slightly, probably not enough to be noticeable to anyone else, but he saw it. She would not be interested either, he knew. No court appearance as a tame witness, a prostitute, paid to offer testimony proving or disproving sanity, not for her. Besides, she was not qualified; she was a psychologist, retired, not a psychiatrist. For an instant he had an eerie feeling that the second thought had been hers. He looked at her sharply; she was studying Deborah Rice with bright interest. A suggestion of a smile had eased the tightness of her mouth.

And Deborah seemed to settle deeper in her chair. "Hear me out," she said. Underlying the imperious tone was another tone that might have been fear. "Just let me tell you about it. Please."

Constance looked at Lori, who was teasing Brutus, tickling his ears, restoring his equanimity with gentle strokes, then tickling again. Lori was a beautiful child, and if having access to all the money in the world had spoiled her, it did not show. She was just beginning to curve with adolescence, although her eyes were very aware. She knew the danger in teasing a full-grown, strange cat.

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"We'll listen, of course," Constance said easily to Deborah Rice, accepting for now the presence of the girl.

"Thank you. My father is eighty," she said, her voice becoming brisk and businesslike. "And he is in reasonably good health. Years ago he bought a little valley west of Pueblo, Colorado, in the mountains. Over the last few years he's stayed there more and more, and now he's there almost all the time. He has his secretary, and computers, modems, every convenience, and really there's no reason why he can't conduct business from the house. The home office is in Denver and there are offices in New York, California, England. But he's in control. You have to understand that. There are vice-presidents and managers and God knows what to carry out his orders, and it's been like that for twenty-five years. Nothing has changed in that respect. My brother can't make a case that he's neglecting the business."

Charlie watched Brutus struggle with indecision, and finally decide that he was being mistreated. He did not so much jump from Lori's lap as flow off to the floor; he stretched, hoisted his tail, and stalked out without a backward glance. Lori began to pick at a small scab on her elbow. The fragrance of apple blossoms drifted through the room. Charlie swallowed a yawn.

"I live in Bridgeport," Deborah was saying. "My husband is the conductor of the symphony orchestra, and we're busy with our own lives. Admittedly I haven't spent a great deal of time with Father in the last years, but neither has Tony, my brother. Anyway, last month Tony called me to say Father was having psychological problems. I flew out to Colorado immediately. Lori went with me." She turned her gaze toward her daughter. She took a deep breath, then continued. "Father was surrounded by his associates, as usual. People are always in and out. They use the company helicopter to go back and forth. At first I couldn't see anything at all different, but then . . . There's a new man out there. He calls himself Ramón, claims he's a Mexican friend of a friend, or something, and he has a terrible influence over my father. This is what bothered Tony so much."

Constance and Charlie exchanged messages in a glance. Hers was, *they'll go away pretty soon, be patient.* His was, *let's give them the bum's rush.* Deborah Rice was frowning slightly at nothing in particular. And now, Constance realized, Lori was putting on an act, pretending interest in a magazine she had picked up. She was unnaturally still, as if she was holding her breath.

Finally Deborah went on. "Tony believes Ramón was responsible for the firing of two of his, Tony's, subordinates at the house. It's like a little monarchy," she said with some bitterness. "Everyone has spies, intrigues.

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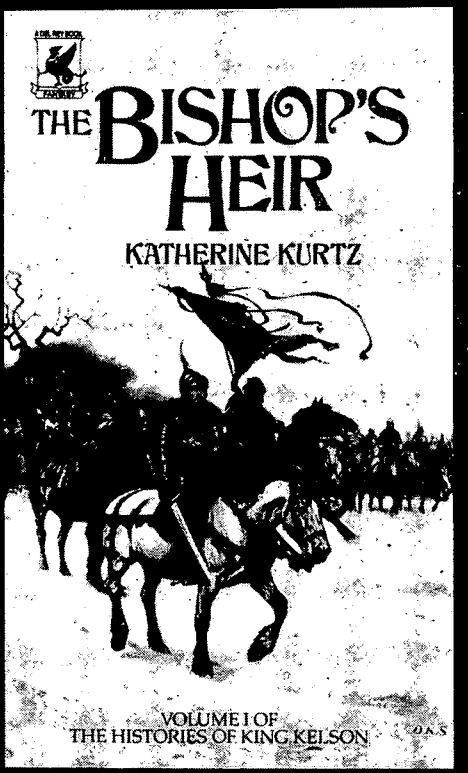

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DEL REY

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The two people Father fired alerted Tony about Ramón. Tony's office is in New York, you see."

"That hardly seems like enough to cause your brother to assume your father's losing it," Charlie said bluntly.

"No, of course not. There are other things. Tony's convinced that Father is completely dominated by Ramón. He's trying to gather evidence. You see, Ramón is . . . strange."

"He's a shaman," Lori said, her face flushed. She ducked her head and mumbled, "He can do magic and Grandpa knows it." She leafed through the magazine, turning pages rapidly.

"And do you know it, too?" Charlie asked.

"Sure. I saw him do magic."

Deborah sighed. "That's why I brought her," she said. "Go on and tell them."

It came out in a torrent; obviously this was what she had been waiting for. "I was at the end of the valley, where the stone formations are, and Ramón came on a horse and got off it and began to sing. Chant, not really sing. And then he was on top of one of the pillars and singing to the setting sun. Only you can't get up there. I mean, they just go straight up, hundreds of feet up. But he was up there until the sun went down and I ran home and didn't even stop."

She turned another page of the magazine. Very gently Charlie asked, "Did Ramón see you when he rode up on his horse?"

She continued to look at the pages. "I guess he saw me run. From up there you could see the whole valley." Her face looked pinched when she raised her head and said to Charlie, "You think I'm lying? Or that I'm crazy? Like Uncle Tony thinks Grandpa is crazy?"

"No, I don't think you're crazy," he said soberly. "Of course, I'm not the expert in those matters. Are you crazy?"

"No! I saw it! I wasn't sleeping or dreaming or smoking dope or having an adolescent fantasy!" She shot a scornful look at her mother, then ducked her head again and became absorbed in the glossy advertising.

Deborah looked strained and older than her age. "Will you please go out and bring in the briefcase?" she asked quietly. "I brought pictures of the formations she's talking about," she added to Constance and Charlie.

Lori left them after a knowing look, as if very well aware that they wanted to talk about her.

"Is it possible that she was molested?" Constance asked as soon as she was out of the house.

"I thought of that. She ran in that day in a state of hysteria. I took her to her doctor, of course, but there was no evidence that anything like that happened."

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"Mrs. Rice," Charlie said then, "that was a month ago. Why are you here now, today?"

She bit her lip and took a deep breath. "Lori is an accomplished musician, violin and flute, piano. She can play almost any instrument she handles. It's a real gift. Recently, last week, I kept hearing this weird, that's the only word I can think of, weird music. Over and over, first on one instrument, then another. I finally demanded that she tell me what she was up to, and she admitted she was trying to recreate the chant Ramón had sung. She's obsessed with it, with him, perhaps. It frightened me. If one encounter with him could affect her that much, what is he doing to my father? Maybe Tony's right. I don't know what I think anymore."

"Have you thought of counseling for her?" Constance asked.

"Yes. She didn't cooperate, became defensive, accused me of thinking she's crazy. It's so ridiculous and at the same time terrifying. We had a good relationship until this happened. She always was close to her father and me until this. Now . . . You saw the look she gave me."

And how much of that was due to adolescent string cutting, how much due to Ramón? Constance let it go when Lori returned with the briefcase.

"One last question," Charlie said a little later, after examining the photographs of the valley. Lori had gone outside to look for the cats; she had asked permission without prompting, apparently now bored with the conversation. "Why us? Your brother has hired detectives, presumably, to check on Ramón." She nodded. "And you could buy a hospital and staff it with psychiatrists, if you wanted that. What do you want us to do?"

She looked embarrassed suddenly. She twisted her watch band and did not look directly at them now. "Tony had a woman sent out, a detective," she said hesitantly. "Within a week she left the valley and refused to go back. I think she was badly frightened." She glanced at Charlie then away. "I may be asking you to do something dangerous. I just don't know. But I don't think the detectives looking for Ramón's past will come up with anything. They haven't yet. Whatever secret he has, whatever he can or can't do, is out there in the valley. Expose him, discredit him, or . . . or prove he is what he claims. Father named the valley. The Valley of Gorgons. I said he's ignorant and he is. He didn't know who the Gorgons were. He named the valley after the formations, thinking, I suppose, the people turned to stone were the Gorgons. He hasn't read any of the literature about shamanism, either, none of the Don Juan books, nothing like that. But Ramón has studied them all, I'd be willing to bet. It will take someone as clever as he is to expose him and I just don't think Tony's detectives will be capable of it."

"Specifically what do you want us to do?" Charlie asked in his sleepy

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voice. Constance felt a chill when she realized that he had taken on the case already no matter what exactly Deborah was asking of them.

"Go out there and spend a week, two weeks, however long it takes and find out what hold he has on my father. Find out how he fools so many people into believing in his magic. Prove he's a charlatan out for my father's money. I'll be there. You can be my guests. I've done that before, had guests at the house."

"Will you take Lori?" Charlie asked.

"No! She'll never see him again! This fascination will pass. She'll forget him. I'm concerned for my father."

Their tickets had arrived by special delivery the day following Deborah's visit, first class to Denver, where, she had told them, they would be met. Their greeter at Stapleton had been a charming, dimpled young woman who had escorted them to a private lounge and introduced Captain Smollet, who was to fly them to Pueblo in the company plane, as soon as their baggage was available. In Pueblo they had been met again, by another lovely young woman who gave them keys to a Cadillac Seville and a map to the Valley of Gorgons and wished them luck in finding it.

And now Charlie was driving the last miles, according to the map, which had turned out to be much better than the road maps he was used to. Deborah had offered to have them met by the company helicopter which could take them all the way to the house, and Constance had refused politely, and adamantly. She would walk first. The scenery was breathtaking, sheer cliffs with high trees on the upper reaches, piñons and stunted desert growth at the lower elevations, and, watered by the run-off of spring, green everywhere. All the peaks gleamed with snow, melt-water streams cascaded down the precipitous slopes, and it seemed that the world was covered with columbines in profuse bloom, more brilliant that Constance had dreamed they could be.

At the turn they came to next they were warned by a neat sign that this was a dead-end road, private property, no admittance. The woods pressed closer here, made a canopy overhead. In the perpetual shadows snow lingered in drifts that were only faintly discolored. They climbed briefly, made a sweeping turn, and Charlie braked.

"Holy Christ!" he breathed.

Constance gasped in disbelief as he brought the Cadillac to a stop on the side of the mountain road. Below was the Valley of Gorgons. It looked as if a giant had pulled the mountain apart to create a deep, green Eden with a tiny stream sparkling in the sunshine, groves of trees here and there, a small dam and a lake that was the color of the best turquoise. A meadow was in the center of the valley, with horses that looked like toys. Slowly Charlie began to drive again, but he stopped frequently and

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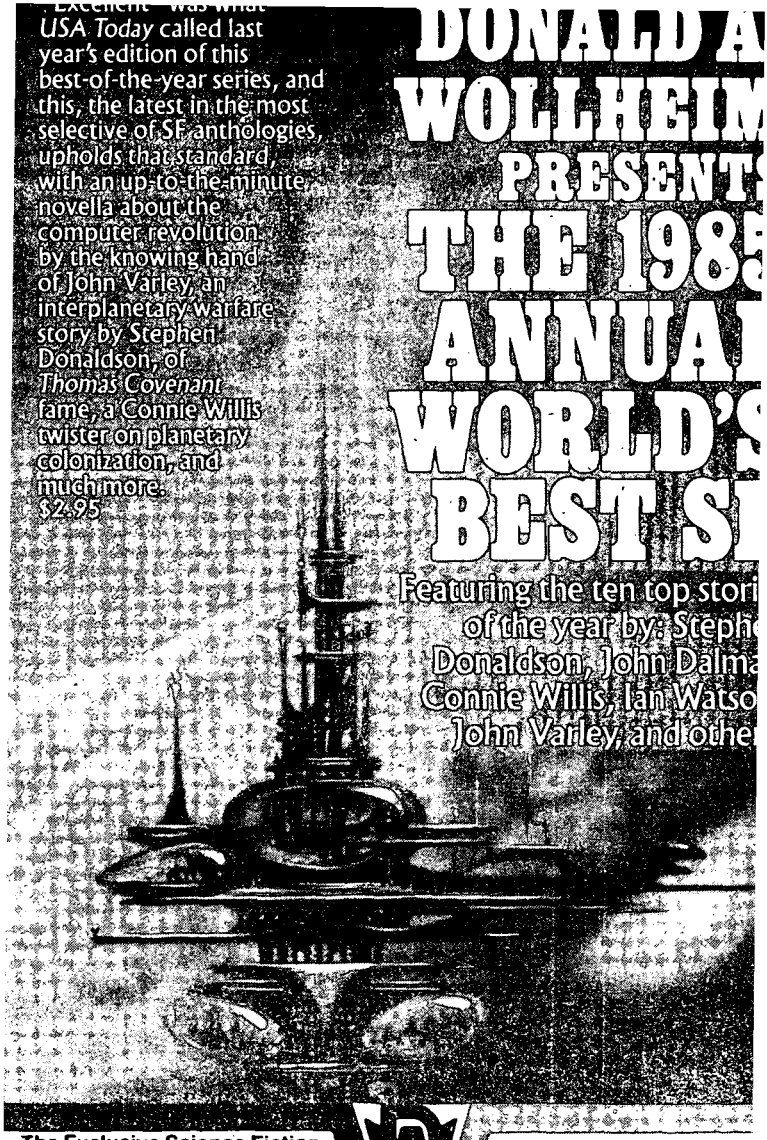

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the houses and outbuildings became more detailed, less doll-like. And finally they had gone far enough to be able to turn and see for the first time the sandstone formations that had given the valley its name. It was late afternoon; the sunlight shafted through the pillars. They looked like frozen flames—red, red-gold, red with black streaks, yellow. . . . Frozen flames leaping toward the sky.

The valley, according to the map, was about six miles long, tapered at the east end to a blunt point, with two leg-like projections at the western end, one of them nearly two miles long, the other one and a half miles, both roughly fifty feet wide, and in many places much narrower. The lake and several buildings took up the first quarter of the valley, then the main house and more buildings, with a velvety lawn surrounding them all, ended at the half-way point. The meadow with the grazing horses made up the next quarter and the sandstone formations filled the rest. At the widest point the valley was two miles across, but most of it was less than that. The stream was a flashing ribbon that clung close to the base of the cliffs. There was no natural inlet to the valley except for the tumbled rocks the stream had dislodged. A true hidden valley, Constance thought, awed by the beauty, the perfect containment of a small Eden.

Deborah met them at the car. Close behind her was a slender young Chicano. She spoke rapid Spanish to him and he nodded. "Come in," she said to Constance and Charlie then. "I hope your trip was comfortable, not too tiring. I'm glad you're here. This is Manuel. He'll be at your beck and call for the duration of your visit, and he speaks perfect English, so don't let him kid you about that." Manuel grinned sheepishly.

"How do you do?" Constance said to the youth. "Just Manuel?"

"Just Manuel, Señora," he said. His voice was soft, the words not quite slurred, but easy.

Charlie spoke to him and went behind the car to open the trunk, get out their suitcases.

"Please, Señor," he said, "permit me. I will place your things in your rooms."

"You might as well let him," Deborah said with a shrug. "Look." She was looking past them and the car toward the end of the valley.

The golden globe of the sun was balanced on the highest peak of the formations. It began to roll off; the pillars turned midnight black with streaks of light blazing between them too bright to bear. Their fire had been extinguished and the whole world flamed behind them. No one spoke or moved until the sun dropped behind the mountain peak in the distance and the sky was awash in sunset colors of cerise and green and rose-gold; the pillars were simply dark forms against the gaudy backdrop.

Charlie was the first one to move. He had been holding the keys; now

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he extended them toward Manuel, and realized that the boy was regarding Constance with a fixed gaze. When Charlie looked at her, there were tears in her eyes. He touched her arm. "Hey," he said gently. "You okay?"

She roused with a start. "I must be more tired than I realized."

"Sí," Manuel said then and took the keys.

Deborah led them into the house. The house kept changing, Charlie thought as they entered. From up on the cliff it had not looked very large or imposing. The bottom half was finished in gray stone the color of the granite cliffs behind it. The upper floor had appeared to be mostly glass and pale wood. Above that a steep roof had gleamed with skylights. It had grown as they approached until it seemed to loom over everything else; none of the other buildings was two stories high. But as soon as they were inside, everything changed again. They were in a foyer with a red tile floor; there were many immense clay pots with greenery, trees, bushes, flowering plants perfumed the air. Ahead, the foyer widened, became an indoor courtyard, and the light was suffused with the rose tints of sunset. The proportions were not inhuman here; the feeling was of comfort and simplicity and warmth. In the center of the courtyard was a pool with a fountain made of greenish quartz and granite.

"Father said it was to help humidify the air," Deborah said. "But actually he just likes it."

"Me too," Charlie agreed.

"It's all incredible," Constance said. They were moving toward a wide, curving staircase, and stopped when a door opened across the courtyard and a man stepped out, leaning on a gnarly cane. He was wearing blue jeans and a chamois shirt and boots. His hair was silver.

"Father," Deborah said, and motioned for Charlie and Constance to come. "These are my friends I mentioned. They got here in time for the sunset."

"I know," he said. "I was upstairs watching too." His eyes were on Constance. They were so dark they looked black, and his skin was deeply tanned.

Deborah introduced them. He did not offer to shake hands, but bowed slightly. "Mi casa es su casa," he said. "Please join me for supper." He bowed again and stepped back into what they could now see was an elevator. "And you, of course," he added to his daughter and the door closed on him.

"Well," Deborah said with an undercurrent of unease, "aren't you the honored ones? Sometimes people are here a week before they even see him, much less have a meal with him." She gave Constance a searching look. "He was quite taken with you."

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"Does he have rheumatoid arthritis?" Constance asked as they resumed their way toward the stairs, started up.

"Yes. Most of the time it's under control, but it is painful. He says he feels better here than anywhere else. I guess the aridity helps."

The courtyard soared to the skylights. On the second floor a wide balcony overlooked it; there were Indian rugs on the walls between doors, and on the floor. It was bright and informal and lovely, Constance thought again. It did not surprise her a bit that Carl Wyandot felt better here than anywhere else.

Deborah took them to two rooms at the south-east corner of the house. There was a spacious bathroom with a tub big enough to lie down in and float. If they wanted anything, she told them, please ring. She had not been joking about Manuel being at their disposal. He was their personal attendant for the duration of their visit. Dinner would be at seven. She would come for them shortly before that. "And don't dress up," she added at the door. "No one ever does here. I'll keep on what I'm wearing." She was dressed in chinos and a cowboy shirt with pointed flaps over the breast pockets, and a wide belt with a huge silver buckle.

As soon as she was gone and the door firmly closed, Charlie took Constance by the shoulders and studied her face intently. "What is it, honey? What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing. That's what's wrong, nothing is. Does that make any sense?"

"No," he said bluntly, not releasing her.

"Didn't you feel it when we first got out of the car?" Her pale blue eyes were sparkling, there was high color on her fair cheeks, as if she had a fever. He touched her forehead and she laughed. "I felt something, and then when the sunset flared, it was like an electric jolt. Didn't you feel that?"

"I wish to hell we were home."

"Maybe we are. Maybe I'll never want to leave here." She spoke lightly, and now she moved away from his hands to go to the windows. "I wish we could have had a room on the west side. But I suppose he has that whole end of the house. I would if it were mine."

"It's just a big expensive house on an expensive piece of real estate," he said. "All it takes is enough money."

She shook her head. "Oh, no. That's not it. All the money on earth wouldn't buy what's out there."

"And what's that?"

"Magic. This is a magic place."

They dined in Carl Wyandot's private sitting room. Here too were the decorative Indian and Mexican rugs, the wall hangings, the pots with

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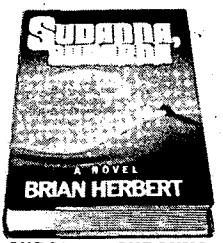

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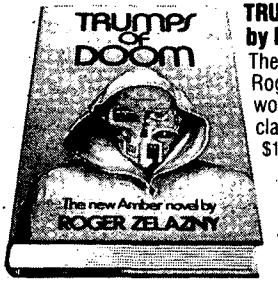

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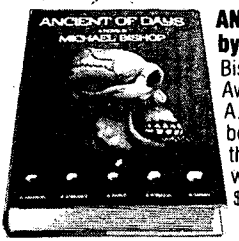

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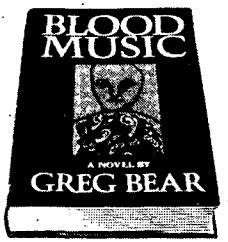

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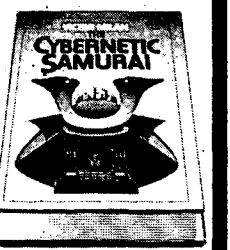

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lush plants. And here the windows were nearly floor to ceiling with drapes that had been opened all the way. He had the entire western side of the second floor, as Constance had guessed he would. When she saw how he handled his silverware, she knew Deborah had been right; they were being honored. His hands were misshapen with arthritis, drawn into awkward angles, the knuckles enlarged and sore looking. He was a proud man; he would not permit many strangers to gawk.

The fifth member of the party was Ramón. Thirty, forty, older? Constance could not tell. His eyes were a warm brown, his face smooth, his black hair moderately short and straight. He had a lithe, wiry build, slender hands. And, she thought, if she had to pick one word to use to describe him, it would be stillness. Not rigidity or strain, but a natural stillness. He did not fidget or make small talk or respond to rhetorical questions, and yet he did not give the impression of being bored or withdrawn. He was dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved plaid shirt; in this establishment it appeared that only the servants dressed up. The two young men who waited on them wore black trousers, white dress shirts and string ties. They treated Ramón with perhaps a shade more reverence than they showed Wyandot.

Charlie was telling about the day he had run into one of the arsonists he had put away who was then out of prison. "He introduced me to his pals, told them who I was, what I had done, all of it, as if he was proud. Then we sat down and had a beer and talked. He wasn't resentful, but rather pleased to see me again."

Carl Wyandot nodded. "Preserving the order of the cosmos is always a pleasing experience. He had his role, you had yours. But you can't really be retired after being so active, not at your age!"

He was too shrewd to lie to, Charlie decided, and he shook his head. "I do private investigations now and then. And Constance writes books and does workshops sometimes. We stay busy."

Deborah was the only one who seemed shocked by this disclosure.

"Actually I'm planning a book now," Constance said. "It will deal with the various superstitions that continue to survive even in this superrational age. Like throwing coins into a fountain. That goes so far back that no one knows for certain when it began. We assume that it was to propitiate the Earth Goddess for the water that the people took from her. It has variations throughout the literature."

"To what end?" Carl Wyandot asked. "To debunk or explain or what?"

"I don't debunk things of that sort," she said. "They are part of our heritage. I accept the theory that the archetypes are patterns of possible behavior, they determine how we perceive and react to the world, and usually they can't be explained or described. They come to us as visions, or dream images, and they come to all of us in the same forms over and

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over. Civilized, educated Westerner, African native who has never seen a book, they have the same dream images, the same impulses in their response to the archetypes. If we try to bury them, deny them, we are imperiling our own psyches."

"Are you not walking the same ground that Carl Jung plowed?" Ramón asked. He spoke with the polite formality of one whose English was a second language, learned in school.

"It's his field," Constance said. "But it's a very big field and he opened it to all. His intuition led him to America, you know, to study the dreams of the Hopi, but he did not pursue it very far. One lifetime was not long enough, although it was a very long and very productive lifetime."

"Did he not say that good sometimes begets evil? And that evil necessarily begets evil."

"Where did he say that? I don't recall it."

"Perhaps I am mistaken. However, he knew that this inner voyage of discovery can be most dangerous. Only the very brave dare risk it, or the very foolish."

Constance nodded soberly. "He did say the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The risk may be in coming across the shadow that is not only darker than you expected, but larger, large enough to swallow you."

Ramón bowed slightly. "We shall talk again, I hope, before your visit comes to an end. Now, please forgive me, Don Carlos, but it is late."

"Yes, it is," the old man said. "Our guests have had a very long day." One of the servants appeared behind his chair; others seemed to materialize, and the evening was over.

"Thank you, Mr. Wyandot," Constance said. "It was a good evening."

"For me as well," he said, and he looked at Ramón. "You heard what he called me. Please, you also, call me that. It sounds less formal, don't you agree?"

Deborah walked to their room with them. At the door she said abruptly, "May I come in and have a drink?"

Someone had been there. The beds were turned down in one room, and in the other a tray had been brought up with bottles, glasses, an ice bucket. Charlie went to examine the bottles and Constance said she wanted coffee. Deborah rang and it seemed only an instant before there was a soft knock; she asked Manuel to bring coffee and then sat down and accepted the drink Charlie had poured for her.

"You just don't realize what happened tonight," she said after taking a long drink. "Father doesn't usually see strangers at all. He doesn't ask them to dinner. He doesn't introduce them to Ramón. And he doesn't take a back seat and watch others engage in conversation. Skoal!" She

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drank again, then added, "And Ramón was as gabby as a school girl. Another first. He said more to you tonight than he's ever said to me."

Manuel came back with coffee and Deborah finished her drink and stood up. "Tomorrow when you wake up, just ring for breakfast. That's what we all do. No one but the managers and people like that eat in the dining room. Wander to your heart's content and I'll see you around noon and give you the grand tour. Okay?"

As soon as she was gone, Charlie turned to Constance. "He was warning you loud and clear," he said.

"I know."

"I don't like it."

"I think we're keeping order in the cosmos," she said thoughtfully. "And I think it's better that way. Now for those books."

They had asked Deborah for everything in the house about her father, the history of the area, geology, whatever was available. Deborah had furnished a dozen books at least. Reluctantly Charlie put his drink aside and poured coffee for himself. It would be a while before they got to bed.

It was nearly two hours later when Constance closed her book with a snap, and saw that Charlie was regarding her with brooding eyes.

"Wow," he said softly.

"The biography?"

"Yeah. Want me to paraphrase the early years?" At her nod, he took a deep breath and started. "Tom Wyandot had a falling out with his family, a good, established English family of lawyers back in Virginia. He headed west, looked for gold in California and Mexico, got married to a Mexican woman, had a son, Carl. He heard there was a lot of gold still in Colorado, and headed for the mountains with his wife, Carl, two Mexican men, an Indian guide, and the wife of one of the men. At some point a gang of outlaws got on their trail and the Indian brought the party to the valley to hide. A few nights later the outlaws made a sneak attack and killed everyone but Tom Wyandot and the child Carl. Tom managed to hide them among the formations. The next day he buried the rest of the group, including his wife, and he and the boy started out on foot, forty miles to Pueblo, with no supplies, horses, anything else. They got there almost dead. Carl was five."

Constance's eyes were distant, unfocused. He knew she was visualizing the scenes; he continued. "For the next eight years Tom prowled the mountains, sometimes taking Carl, sometimes alone. Then he died, and it's a little unclear just how. Carl was with him, on one of their rambles, and Carl returned alone. He said his father had fallen over a cliff. He led a search party to the location and they recovered the body, buried him in Pueblo, and Carl took off. He turns up next a year later in Texas, where he later struck it rich in oil."

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Constance pulled herself back with a sigh. "Oh dear," she murmured. "Carl bought the valley in nineteen thirty. He started construction in nineteen forty." She frowned. "I wonder just when he located the valley again."

"Me too. But right now, what I'm thinking is that my body seems to believe it's way past bedtime. It won't have any truck with clocks."

"The idea is to bake yourself first and then jump into the lake," Constance said the next day, surveying the sauna with approval.

"No way. You have any idea of the temperature of the lake?"

"I know, but it'll have to do. There just isn't any snow around."

"That isn't exactly what I meant," he said acidly.

"Oh?" Her look of innocence was a parody; they both laughed. "I'm not kidding, you'll really be surprised. You'll love it."

They wandered on. Swimming pool, steam room, gymnasium, Jacuzzi, a boathouse with canoes and rowboats . . . One of the other buildings held offices, another was like a motel with its own coffee shop. There were other outbuildings for machinery, maintenance equipment, garages, and a hangar. The helicopter, Charlie remembered. It was impossible to estimate the size of the staff. They kept catching glimpses of servants—the males in black trousers and white shirts, the females in gaily patterned dresses or skirts and blouses. They introduced themselves to several of the men Deborah had called the managers, all in sports clothes, all looking as if they were wearing invisible gray suits.

"It's a whole damn city," Charlie complained. They had left the main complex and were walking along a path that was leading them to a grove of cottonwood trees. Ahead were several cottages, well separated, very private. They stopped. Ramón was coming toward them.

"Good morning," Constance called to him. "What a lovely morning!"

He nodded. "Good morning. I intended finding you, to invite you to dinner in my house. It would give me honor."

Charlie felt a flash of irritation when Constance agreed without even glancing toward him. He would have said yes also, but usually they consulted silently, swiftly. And why was Ramón making it easy? he wondered glumly. He knew damn well they were there to investigate him. Ramón bowed slightly and went back the way he had come, and they turned to go the other way. Charlie's uneasiness increased when it occurred to him that Ramón had stalled their unannounced visit very neatly.

When Deborah met them at noon, she had a jeep waiting to take them to the gorgons. The first stop was at a fenced area at the far end of the meadow. Inside the fence, smooth, white river stones had been laid in a mound. A bronze plaque had been placed there. There were the names:

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Beatrix Wyandot, Pablo and Maria Marquesa, Juan Moreno, and Julio Tallchief. Under them the inscription: Massacred July 12, 1906.

"Father left space for his grave," Deborah said. "He's to be buried there alongside his mother. Then no one else."

This was the widest part of the valley, two miles across. The mountains rose very steeply on both sides in unscalable cliffs at this end, exactly as if a solid mass of granite had been pulled open to reveal the sandstone formations. They started fifty yards from the graves.

Constance studied the columns and pillars; when Deborah started to talk again, she moved away from the sound of her voice. She had read about the formations. The largest of them was one hundred eighty feet high with a diameter of forty-eight feet. The pillars soared into the brilliant blue sky with serene majesty. They appeared even redder than they had at a distance. The rubble around the bases was red sand with silvery sagebrush here and there. Larger pieces had fallen off, had piled up in some places like roots pushing out of the ground. She had the feeling that the formations had not been left by the erosion of the surrounding land, but that they were growing out of the earth, rising of their own will, reaching for the sky. The silence was complete here. No wind stirred the sage or blew the sand; nothing moved.

There was a right way; there was a wrong way. She took a step, then another, another. She retreated, went a different way. She was thinking of nothing, not able to identify what it was she felt, something new, something compelling. Another step. The feeling grew stronger. For a moment she held an image of a bird following a migratory pattern; it slipped away. Another step.

Suddenly Charlie's hand was on her arm, shaking her. "For God's sake, Constance!"

Then the sun was beating down on her head, too hot in this airless place, and she glanced about almost indifferently. "I was just on my way back," she said.

"Did you hear me calling you?"

"I was thinking."

"You didn't hear a thing. You were like a sleepwalker."

She took his hand and started to walk. "Well, I'm awake now and starved. Is it lunch yet?"

Charlie's eyes remained troubled all afternoon and she did not know what to say, what to tell him, how to explain what she had done. She had wandered all the way back through the gorgons to the opposite side, a mile and a half at least, and if he had not actually seen her, she might still be wandering, because she had not heard him, had not even thought of him. She felt that she had entered a dream world where time was not

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allowed, that she had found a problem to solve, and the problem could not be stated, the solution, even if found, could never be explained.

Late in the afternoon Constance coaxed Charlie into the sauna with her, and then into the lake, and he was as surprised as she had known he would be, and as delighted. They discovered the immense tub in their suite was large enough for two people. They made love languorously and slept for nearly an hour. A good day, all things considered, he decided when they went to Ramón's cottage for dinner. It had not escaped his attention that Constance had timed things in order to be free to stand outside and watch the sunset flame the gorgons.

Tonight, Ramón told them, they would have peasant food. He had cooked dinner—a pork stew with cactus and tomatillos and plantains. It was delicious.

They sipped thick Mexican coffee in contentment. Throughout dinner they had talked about food, Mexican food, how it differed from one section of the country to another, how it differed from Central and South American food. Ramón talked charmingly about childhood in Mexico, the festivals, the feasts.

Lazily Charlie said, "You may know peasant food but you're not a peasant. Where did you go to school?"

Ramón shrugged. "Many places. University of Mexico, UCLA, the Sorbonne. I am afraid I was not a good student. I seldom attended regular classes. Eventually each school discovered this and invited me to go away."

"You used the libraries a lot, I expect," Charlie said almost indifferently.

"Yes. Señor, it is understood that you may want to ask me questions."

"Did Mrs. Rice tell you she hired us?"

"No, señor. Don Carlos told me this."

"Did he also tell you why?"

"The little girl, Lori, saw something that frightened her very much. It worries her mother. And Señor Tony is very unhappy with my presence here."

In exasperation Charlie asked, "Are you willing to simply clear up any mystery about yourself? Why haven't you already done it?"

"Señor, there is no mystery. From the beginning I have stated what I desire. First to Don Carlos, then to anyone who asked."

"And what is that?"

"To own the valley. When Don Carlos lies beside his mother, then I shall own the valley."

For a long time Charlie stared at him silenced, disbelieving. Finally he said, "And you think Don Carlos will simply give it to you?"

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"Sí."

"Why?"

"I cannot say, Señor. No man can truly say what is in the heart of another."

Charlie felt the hairs on his arms stirring and turned to Constance. She was signaling. No more, not now. Not yet. Abruptly he stood up. "We should go."

"Thank you," Constance said to Ramón. "We really should go now."

He walked out with them. The night air was cold, the sky very clear with more stars visible than they had ever seen in New York state. A crescent moon hung low in the eastern sky, its mountains clear, jagged. The gorgons were lost in shadows now. But the moon would sail on the sun path, Constance thought, and set over the highest pinnacle and silver light would flow through the openings.

"Good night, Señora," Ramón said softly, and left them.

They did not speak until they were in their room. "May we have coffee?" Constance asked Manuel. There were many more books to read, magazine articles to scan.

"It's blackmail," Charlie said with satisfaction when Manuel had vanished. "So what does he have on Don Carlos?"

Constance gave him a disapproving look. "That's too simple."

"Maybe. But I've found that the simplest explanation is usually the right one. He's too damn sure of himself. It must be something pretty bad."

She moved past him to stand at the window. She would have to be out at sunrise, she was thinking, when the sun would appear above the tumbled rocks of the stream and light up the gorgons with its first rays. Something nagged at her memory. They had looked up the rough waterway, not really a waterfall, but very steep, the water flashing in and out of the granite, now spilling down a few feet, to pour over rocks again. It was as if the sunlight, the moonlight had cut through the cliff, opened a path for the tumbling water. The memory that had tried to get through receded.

Manuel brought their coffee and they settled down to read. A little later Charlie put down his book with disgust and started to complain, when he saw that she was sleeping. He took her book from her lap; she roused only slightly and he took her by the hand to the bedroom, got her into bed. Almost instantly she was sleeping soundly. He returned to his books.

He would poke around in the library and if he didn't find something written about Wyandot by someone who had not idolized him, he would have to go to Denver, or somewhere, and search further. Wyandot and his past, that was the key, he felt certain. Blackmail. Find the leverage

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and confront both blackmailer and victim and then get the hell out of here. He nodded. And do it all fast.

The next morning he woke up to find Constance's bed empty. He started to get up, then lay down again staring at the ceiling. She had gone out to look at the formations by sunrise, he knew. He waited, tense and unhappy, until she returned quietly, undressed and got back in bed. He pretended to be asleep and in a short while he actually fell asleep again. Neither of them mentioned it that day.

She insisted on going to the gorgons again in the afternoon. "Take some books along," she said in an offhand manner. "I want to explore and I may be a while." She did not look at him when she said this. Today they planned to ride horses and eat sandwiches and not return until after sundown.

He had binoculars this time and before the afternoon ended he found himself birdwatching. Almost angrily he got to his feet and started to walk among the gorgons, looking for Constance. She had been gone for nearly two hours. Abruptly he stopped, even more angrily. She had asked him to wait, not come after her. He glanced about at the formations; it was like being in a red sandstone forest with the trunks of stone trees all around him casting long black shadows, all pointing together at the other end of the valley, pointing at the spillway the stream had cut. It was too damn quiet in here. He found his way out and stood in the shade looking at the entire valley lying before him. The late sun turned the cascading stream into gold. He was too distant to see its motion, it looked like a vein of gold in the cliffs. He raised the binoculars and examined the valley slowly, and even more slowly studied the spillway. He swore softly, and sat down in the shade to wait for Constance and think.

When she finally appeared she was wan and abstracted. "Satisfied?" he asked and now there was no anger in his voice, only concern.

She shook her head. "I'm trying too hard. Want to start back?"

Manuel came with the horses, guaranteed gentle and safe, he had assured them earlier, and he had been right. They rode slowly, not talking. Night fell swiftly here after the sun went down. It was nearly dark when they reached the house and their room again. Would they like dinner served in their room? Manuel had asked, and after looking at Constance, Charlie had nodded.

"Can you tell me what you're doing?" he asked her after Manuel had left them.

"I don't know."

"Okay. I thought so. I think I'm onto something, but I have to go to Denver. Will you fly out in the helicopter, or should we plan a couple of days and drive?"

"I can't go," she said quietly, and added, "don't press me, please."

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"Right. I'll be back by dark. I sure as hell don't want to try to fly in here blind." He grinned with the words. She responded with a smile belatedly.

He summoned Manuel who nodded when Charlie asked about the helicopter trip. "Sí. When do you want to go?"

And Manuel was not at all surprised that he was going alone, he thought grimly, after making the arrangements. Constance went to bed early again. He stood regarding her as she slept and under his breath he cursed Deborah Rice and her father and Ramón. "You can't have her!" he said silently.

The managers had been in the swimming pool; others had been in the dining room and library. Constance finally had started to gather her books to search for some place quiet. Manuel gently took them from her. "Please, permit me," he said softly. "It is very noisy today."

She had had lunch with Deborah Rice. Tony was coming tomorrow, she had said, and he was both furious and excited. He had something. There would be a showdown, she had predicted gloomily, and her father had never lost a showdown in his life. Deborah was wandering about aimlessly and would intrude again, Constance knew, would want to talk to no point, just to have something to do, and Constance had to think. It seemed that she had not thought anything through since arriving at the Valley of Gorgons. That was the punishment for looking, she thought, wryly: the brain turned to stone.

She was reluctant to return to her rooms. Without Charlie they seemed too empty. "I'll go read out under the gorgons," she said finally. At least out there no one bothered her, and she had to think. She felt that she almost knew something, could almost bring it to mind, but always it slipped away again.

"Sí," Manuel said. "We should take the jeep, Señora. It is not good to ride home after dark."

She started to say she would not be there that long, instead she nodded.

Charlie had been pacing in the VIP lounge for half an hour before his pilot, Jack Wayman, turned up. It was seven-fifteen.

"Where the hell have you been?" Charlie growled. "Let's get going."

"Mr. Meiklejohn, there's a little problem with one of the rotors. I've been trying to round up a part, but no luck. Not until morning."

He was a fresh-faced young man, open, ingenuous. Charlie found his hands balling, took a step toward the younger man, who backed up. "I'll get it airborne by seven in the morning, Mr. Meiklejohn. I'm sure of it. I called the house and explained the problem. You have a room at the Hilton—"

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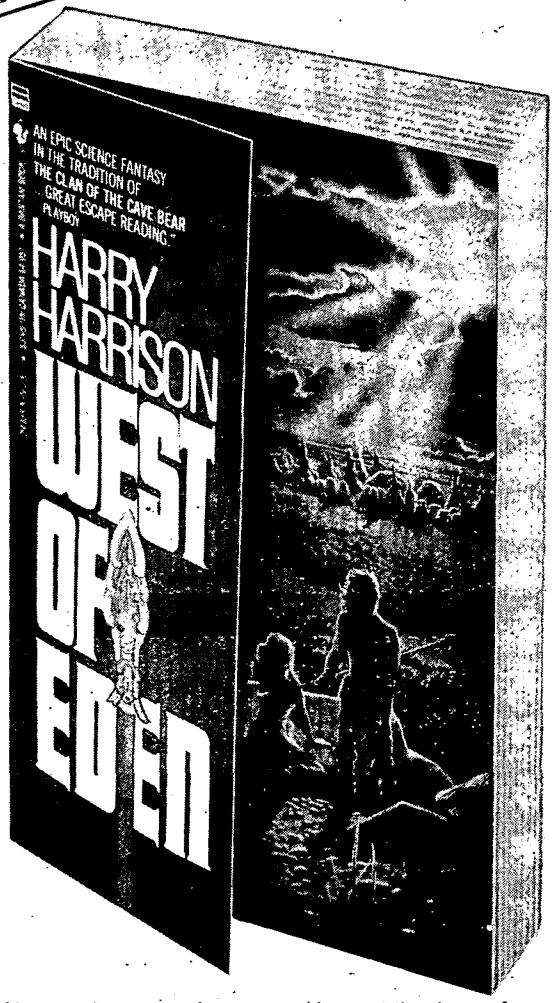
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Charlie spun around and left him talking. He tried to buy a seat on another flight to Pueblo first and when that failed, no more flights out that night, he strode to the Hertz Rental desk.

"I'm going to rent a plane for Pueblo," he said, "and I'll want a car there waiting. Is that a problem?"

The young man behind the desk shrugged. "Problem, sir. They close up at seven down there."

"I'll rent a car here and drive down," Charlie said in clipped, hard voice. "Is *that* a problem?"

"No, sir!"

By a quarter to eight he was leaving the airport. He felt exactly the way he had felt sometimes, especially in his last few years with the fire department, when he knew with certainty the fire had been set, the victim murdered. It was a cold fury, a savage rage made even more dangerous because it was so deep within that nothing of it showed on the surface, but an insane desire, a need, fueled it, and the need was to strike out, to lash out at the criminal, the victims, the system, anything. He knew now with the same certainty that the pilot had waited deliberately until after seven to tell him that he was stranded in Denver. And he was equally certain that by now the pilot had called the valley to warn them that he was driving, that he would be there by midnight. And if they had done anything to Constance, he knew, he would blow that whole valley to hell along with everyone in it.

"Manuel," Constance said when they arrived at the gorgons, "go on back to the house, You don't have to stay out here with me."

"Oh, no, Señora. I will stay."

"No, Manuel. I have to be alone so I can think. That's why I came out here, to think. There are too many people wandering around the house, too many distractions. If I know I'm keeping you out here, waiting, that would be distracting, too. I really want to be alone for a few hours."

"But, Señora, you could fall down, or get lost. Don Carlos would flay me if an accident happened."

She laughed. "Go home, Manuel. You know I can't get lost. Lost where? And I've been walking around more years than you've been alive. Go home. Come back for me right after sunset."

His expression was darkly tragic. "Señora, it is possible to get lost in your own house, in your own kitchen even. And out here it is possible even more."

"If you can't find me," she said softly, "tell Ramón. He'll find me."

"Sí," Manuel said, and walked to the jeep unhappily.

She watched the jeep until it disappeared among cottonwood trees that edged the stream at the far end of the meadow, and only when she could

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no longer see it did she feel truly alone. Although the mornings and nights were cold, the afternoons were warm; right now shade was welcome. She selected a spot in the shade, brushed sand clear of rocks and settled herself to read.

First a history of the area. These were the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, named by the Spanish, long since driven out, leaving behind bits and pieces of their language, bits of architecture. She studied a picture of petroglyphs outside Pueblo, never deciphered, not even by the first Indians the Spaniards had come across. Another people driven out? Leaving behind bits and pieces of a language? She lingered longer over several pictures of the Valley of the Gods west of Colorado Springs. Formations like these, but more extensive, bigger, and also desecrated. She frowned at that thought, then went on to turn pages, stopping only at pictures now. An Oglala Sioux medicine lodge, then the very large medicine wheel in Wyoming, desecrated. The people who constructed the medicine lodges could not explain the medicine wheel, she read, and abruptly snapped the book shut. That was how history was written, she told herself. The victors destroy or try to destroy the gods of the vanquished, and as years go by, the gods themselves fade into the dust. The holy places that remain are turned into tourist attractions, fees are charged, guided tours conducted, books written about the signficance of the megaliths, or the pyramids, or the temples, or the ground drawings. And when the dust stirs, the gods stir also, and they wait.

She began to examine a different book, this one done by a small press, an amateur press. The text was amateurish also, but the photographs that accompanied it were first rate. The photographer had caught the gorgons in every possible light. Brilliant sunlight, morning, noon, sunset . . . Moonlight, again, all phases. During a thunderstorm. She drew in a sharp breath at a picture of lightning frozen on the highest peak. There was one with snow several feet deep; each gorgon wore a snow cap. The last section was a series of aerial pictures, approaching from all directions, with stiletto shadows, no shadows at all. . . . Suddenly she felt vertiginous.

She had come to the final photograph taken from directly above the field of gorgons at noon. There were no shadows, the light was brilliant, the details sharp and clear. Keeping her gaze on the picture, she felt for her notebook and tore out a piece of paper, positioned it over the photograph. The note paper was thin enough for the image to come through. She picked up her pencil and began to trace the peaks, not trying to outline them precisely, only to locate them with circles. When she was done she studied her sketch and thought, of course, that was how they would be.

She put her pencil point on the outermost circle and started to make

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a line linking each circle to the next. When she finished, her pencil was in the center of the formations; she had drawn a spiral. A unicursal labyrinth.

Slowly she stood up and turned toward the gorgons. She had entered in the wrong place before, she thought absently, and she had not recognized the pattern. Knowing now what it was, it seemed so obvious that she marveled at missing it before.

She walked very slowly around the gorgons to the easternmost pillar. Facing the valley, she saw that the low sun had turned the stream to gold; the shadows at her feet reached for it. She entered the formations. There was a right way, and a wrong way, but now the right way drew her; she did not have to think about it. A step. Another.

She did not know how long she had been hearing the soft singing, chanting, but it was all around her, drawing her on, guiding her even more than the feeling of being on the right path. She did not hesitate this time, nor did she retrace any steps. Her pace was steady. When the light failed, she stopped.

I could continue, she said silently in her head.

Sí, Ramón's voice replied, also in her head.

Will it kill me?

I do not know.

I will go out now.

Sí. There was a note of deep regret in the one syllable.

It doesn't matter how I leave, does it?

No, Señora. It does not matter.

She took a step, but now she stumbled, caught herself by clutching one of the gorgons. It was very dark; she could see nothing. There was no sound. Suddenly she felt panic welling up, flooding her. She took another step and nearly fell over a rock. Don't run! she told herself, for God's sake, don't try to run! She took a deep breath, not moving yet. Her heartbeat subsided.

"Please, Señora, permit me." Ramón's soft voice was very near.

She felt his hand on her arm, guiding her, and she followed gratefully until they left the formations and Manuel ran up to her in a greater panic than she had felt.

"Gracias, Madre! Gracias!" he cried. "Oh, Señora, thank goodness, you're safe! Come, let us return to the house!"

She looked for Ramón to thank him, but he was no longer there. Tiredly she went to the jeep and got in. Although it was dark, there was not the impenetrable black that she had experienced within the formations. They swallowed light just as they swallowed sound, she thought without surprise. She leaned back and closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

At the house they were met by a young woman who took Constance

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by the arm. "Señora, please permit me. I am Felicia. Please allow me to assist you."

Manuel had explained the problem with the helicopter and she was glad now that Charlie was not on hand to see her drag herself in in this condition. He would have a fit, she thought, and smiled gratefully at Felicia.

"I am a little bit tired," she admitted. "And very hungry."

Felicia laughed. "First, Don Carlos said, you must have a drink, and then a bath, and then dinner. Is that suitable, Señora?"

"Perfect."

Charlie was cursing bitterly, creeping along the state road looking for a place where he could turn around. He had overshot the private road, he knew. He had driven over forty miles since leaving Pueblo, and the turn was eight to ten miles behind him, but there was no place to turn. He had trouble accepting that he had missed the other road, and the neat sign warning that this was private property, dead end, but it was very black under the trees and he had missed it. And now he had to turn, go back even slower and find it. It was fifteen more minutes before there was a spot flat enough, wide enough to manuever around to head back, and half an hour after that before he saw the sign.

No one could work with the New York fire department and then the police department as many years as he had done without developing many senses that had once been latent only. Those senses could take him through a burned-out building, or into an alleyway, or toward a parked car in a state of alertness that permitted him to know if the next step was a bad one, or if there was someone waiting in the back seat of the car. He had learned to trust those senses without ever trying to identify or isolate them. And now they were making him drive with such caution that he was barely moving; finally he stopped altogether. A mountain road in daylight, he told himself, would look very different from that same road at night. But this different? He closed his eyes and drew up an image of the road he had driven over before—narrow, twisting, climbing and descending steeply, but different from this one that met all those conditions.

This road was not as well maintained, he realized, and it was narrower than the other one. On one side was a black drop-off, the rocky side of the mountain on the other, and not enough space between them to turn around.

"Well, well," he murmured and took a deep breath. This road could meander for miles and end up at a ranch, or a mining camp, or a fire tower, or in a snowbank. It could just peter out finally. He let the long breath out in a sigh. Two more miles, and if he didn't find a place where

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he could turn, he would start backing out. His stomach felt queasy and his palms were sweating now. He began a tuneless whistle, engaged the gears and started forward again.

"You know about the holy places on earth, don't you?" Don Carlos asked Constance. He had invited her to his apartment for a nightcap. Ramón was there, as she had known he would be.

"A little," she said. "In fact, I visited a couple of them some years ago. Glastonbury Tor was one. It was made by people in the megalithic period and endures yet. A three-dimensional labryinth. I was with a group and our guide was careful to point out that simply climbing the hill accounted for all the physiological changes we felt. Shortness of breath, a feeling of euphoria, heightened awareness."

Ramón's stillness seemed to increase as if it were an aura that surrounded him and even part of the room. If one got close enough to him, she thought, the stillness would be invasive.

"I saw Croagh Patrick many years ago," Don Carlos said. "Unfortunately I was a skeptic and refused to walk up it barefooted. I've always wondered what that would have been like."

"The labryinth is one of the strongest mystical symbols," Ramón said. "It is believed that the evil at the center cannot walk out because of the curves. Evil flows in straight lines."

"Must one find only evil there?" Constance asked.

"No. Good and evil dwell there side by side, but it is the evil that wants to come out."

"The Minotaur," she murmured. "Always we find the Minotaur, and it is ourself."

"You don't believe that good and evil exist independently of human agencies?" Ramón asked.

She shook her head.

"Señora, imagine a pharmacy with shelves of bright pills, red, blue, yellow, all colors, some sugarcoated. You would not allow a child to wander there and sample. Good and evil side by side, sometimes in the same capsule. Every culture has traveled the same path from the simplest medicines to the most sophisticated, but they all have this in common: side by side, in the same medicine, evil and good dwell forever intertwined."

"I have read," she said slowly, "that when the guru sits on his mountain top, he increases his power, his knowledge, every time a supplicant makes the pilgrimage to him. In the same way, when children dance the maypole, the center gathers the power. At one time the center was a person who became very powerful this way."

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Ramón nodded. "And sometimes sacrificed at the conclusion of the ceremony."

"Did you try to lure the child Lori to the center of the gorgons?" Her voice sounded harsh even to her own ears.

"No, Señora."

"You tried to coax me in."

"No, Señora. I regretted that you stopped, but I did not lure you."

"Don Carlos is a believer. Why don't you use him?"

"I wanted to," Don Carlos said simply. "I can't walk that far."

"There will be others. Manuel. Or the girl Felicia. There must be a lot of believers here."

"Perhaps because they believe, they fear the Minotaur too much," Ramón said.

"And so do I," she said flatly.

"No, Señora. You do not believe in independent evil. You will meet your personal Minotaur, and you do not fear yourself."

Abruptly she stood up. "I am very tired. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go to bed now."

Neither man moved as she crossed the room. Then Ramón said almost too softly to hear, "Señora, I was not at the gorgons this evening. I have spent the entire evening here with Don Carlos."

She stopped at the door and looked back at them. Don Carlos nodded soberly.

"Constance," he said, "if you don't want to go all the way, leave here tomorrow. Don't go back to the formations."

"You've been here for years," she said. "Why didn't you do it a long time ago?"

For a moment his face looked mummified, bitter; the expression changed, became benign again. "I was the wrong one," he said. "I couldn't find the way. I felt it now and then, but I couldn't find my way."

There was a right way and a wrong way, she thought, remembering. A right person and a wrong person. "Good night," she said quietly, and left them.

She stood by her windows in the dark looking out over the valley, the lake a silver disc in moonlight, the dark trees, pale granite cliffs. "Charlie," she whispered to the night, "I love you." She wished he were with her, and closed her eyes hard on the futile wish. Good night, darling, she thought at him then. Sleep well. When she lay down in bed, she felt herself falling gently into sleep.

Charlie pulled on the hand brake and leaned forward to rest his head on the steering wheel, ease the strain in his neck from watching so closely

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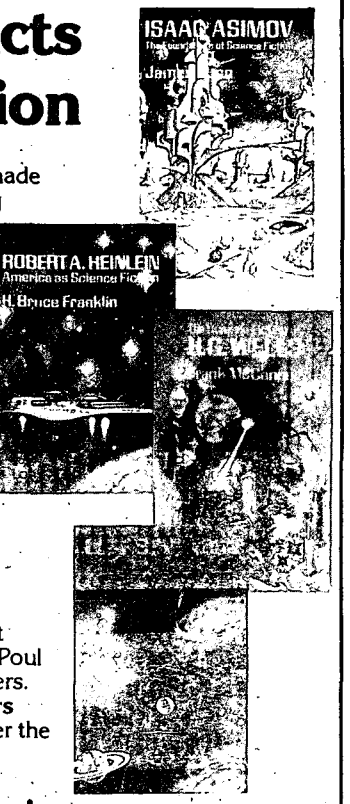

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behind him with his head out the open door. Suddenly he lifted his head, listening. Nothing, hardly even any wind to stir the trees. All at once he admitted to himself that he would not be able to back out in the dark. The backup lights were too dim, the road too curvy with switchbacks that were invisible, and a drop-off too steep, the rocky mountain too close. He had scraped the car several times already, and he had stopped too many times with one or two wheels too close to the edge or even over it. He had thought this before, but each time he had started again; now he reached out and turned off the headlights. The blackness seemed complete at first; gradually moonlight filtered through the trees. It was all right, he thought tiredly. He could rest for a while and at dawn start moving again. He pulled the door shut, cracked the window a little, and leaned back with his eyes closed and slept.

When Charlie drove in the next morning, Constance met him and exclaimed at his condition. "My God, you've been wrestling with bears! Are you all right?"

"Hungry, tired, dirty. All right. You?"

"Fine. Manuel, a pot of coffee right now and then a big breakfast, steak, eggs, fruit, everything. Half an hour."

Charlie waited until they were in their room to kiss her. She broke away shaking her head. "You might have fought off bears, but you won. I'm going to run a bath while you strip. Come on, hop!"

He chuckled and started to peel off his clothes. She really was fine. She looked as if she had slept better than he had anyway. Now the ordeal of trying to get back seemed distant and even ludicrous.

Manuel brought coffee while he was bathing; she took it the rest of the way and sat by the tub while he told her his adventures.

"You really think someone moved the sign?" she asked incredulously. "Why?"

"Why do I think it, or why did they do it?"

"Either. Both."

"It was gone this morning, back where it belonged. I think Ramón didn't want me here last night. What happened?"

"Nothing. That must be breakfast." She nearly ran out.

Nothing? He left the tub and toweled briskly, got on his robe and went to the sitting room where Manuel was finishing arranging the dishes.

When they were alone again, and his mouth full of steak, he said, "Tell me about it."

Constance took her coffee to the window and faced out. "I don't know what there is to tell. I had a nightcap with Don Carlos and Ramón and went to bed pretty early and slept until after eight." She came back and sat down opposite him. "I really don't know what happened," she said

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softly. "Something important, but I can't say what it was. There's power in the gorgons, Charlie. Real power. Anyone who knows the way can tap into it. That sounds so . . . stupid, doesn't it? But it's true. Let me sort it out in my own mind first, okay? I can't talk about it right now. What did you find?"

"Enough to blow Ramón's boat out of the water," he said. At her expression of dismay, he added, "I thought that's what we came here for."

There was a knock on the door and she went to answer it. Deborah was there, looking pale and strained.

"All hell's about to break loose today," she said when Constance waved her in. "Charlie, I'm glad you're back. Father's in conference, and then he's sending his associates to Denver to get together with company attorneys or something. And Tony's due in by two. Father wants to clear the decks before then for the showdown. You're invited. Three, in his apartment."

An exodus began and continued all day. The helicopter came and went several times; a stream of limousines crept up the mountain road, vanished. The loud laughter was first subdued, then gone. Yesterday the managers had all been supremely confident, clad in their invisible gray suits; today, the few that Constance had seen had been like school boys caught doing nasty things in the lavatory.

And now Charlie was probably the only person within miles who was relaxed and comfortable, wholly at ease, watching everything with unconcealed, almost childish interest. They were in Don Carlos's apartment, waiting for the meeting to start. Tony Wyandot was in his mid-forties, trim and athletic, an executive who took his workouts as seriously as his mergers. He was dark, like his father and sister, and very handsome. Constance knew his father must have looked much like that at his age. He had examined her and Charlie very briefly when they were introduced, and, she felt certain, he knew their price, or thought he did. After that he dismissed them.

Charlie sat easily at the far edge of the group, watchful, quiet. Ramón stood near the windows, also silent. Carl Wyandot entered the sitting room slowly, leaning on his cane, nodded to everyone and took his leather chair that obviously had been designed for his comfort. And Deborah sat near him, as if to be able to reach him if he needed help. She and Tony ignored Ramón.

Tony waited until his father was seated, then said, "I asked for a private meeting. I prefer not to talk business or family matters before strangers."

Charlie settled more easily into his chair. He would do, he thought of Tony. Direct, straight to the point, not a trace of fear or subservience,

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but neither was there the arrogance that his appearance hinted at. Equal speaking to equal.

"I doubt we have many secrets," his father said. "You hired detectives and so did your sister." He inclined his head fractionally toward Charlie. "Go on."

Tony accepted this without a flicker. "First, I am relieved that you've ordered the reorganization study to commence. I'll go to Denver, naturally, and stay as long as it's necessary. Three months should be enough time." He paused. "And I find it very disturbing that you've already signed papers about the dispensation of the valley." His level tone did not change; he kept his gaze on his father, but the room felt as if a current had passed through it.

His father remained impassive and silent.

"You have sole ownership, and you can dispose of your property as you see fit," Tony went on, "but a case can be made that this is an unreasonable act."

Deborah made a sound, cleared her throat perhaps, or gasped. No one looked at her.

"I did not believe that you could be so influenced by a stranger that you would behave in an irrational way," Tony said, his gaze unwavering. "That's why I hired the detectives, to find out exactly why you were doing this. And I found out." He paused again, in thought, then said, "I think we should speak in private, Father. I did find out."

"Just say it."

He bowed slightly. "Ramón is your son. The trail is tenuous, not easy to find, but once found, it leads only to that conclusion. He came here and claimed his share of your estate, and that's why you're giving him this valley."

This time Deborah cried out. "That's a lie!"

Tony shook his head. "I wish it were. I had my agency check and double-check. It's true. Father, you were trying to keep the past buried, protect us, yourself, and there's no need. You provided well for him over the years, took care of his mother, saw that he had opportunities. You owe him nothing. A yearly allowance, if you feel you have to, but no more than that."

Ramón had not moved. Constance glanced at him; his face was in deep shadow with the windows behind him. She recalled her own words: the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. Deborah was twisting her hands around and around; she looked at Charlie despairingly, and he shrugged and nodded.

"Father," Tony said then, his voice suddenly gentle, "I think I can understand. There's no record of the marriage of your father and mother. You were illegitimate, weren't you?"

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For the first time Don Carlos reacted. His face flushed and his mouth tightened.

"But don't you see that it's unimportant now?"

"Haven't I provided for you and your sister?"

"We all know you've been more than generous. No one disputes that."

"And you would turn the valley into, what did you call it? a corporate resort? Knowing I detest the idea, you would do that."

"Not right away," his son said with a trace of impatience. "Places like this are vanishing faster all the time. You can hardly find a secluded spot even today. I'm talking about twenty years from now, fifteen at least."

Don Carlos shook his head. "The business will be yours. I have provided a trust for Deborah. Ramón can have the valley. Do you want to pursue this in court?" His face might have been carved from the granite of the cliffs. His eyes were narrowed, they caught the light and gleamed.

He would welcome a fight, Constance realized, watching him. And he would win. Tony flinched away finally and stood up. He had learned well from his father; nothing of his defeat showed in his face or was detectable in his voice when he said, "As you wish, Father. You know I would not willingly do anything to hurt you."

When he walked from the room, Deborah jumped up and ran after him. Now Charlie rose lazily from his chair, grinning. "Is he really finished?" he asked.

Don Carlos was looking at the door thoughtfully; he swung around as if surprised to find anyone still in the room. "He isn't done yet," he admitted. "Not quite yet."

"Congratulations," Charlie said, still grinning. "A masterful job of creating a new heir. I would not like to be your adversary."

The old man studied him, then said in a quiet voice, "Are you exceedingly brave, or simply not very smart? I wonder. You are on my land where I have numerous servants who are, I sometimes think, too fanatically loyal."

Constance was looking from one to the other in bewilderment.

"Let me tell a different story," Charlie said. "A group of people arrives at the top of the cliff, where the stream starts to tumble down into the valley. Two Mexican men, two Mexican women, a child, a white man, and an Indian guide. They can't bring horses down that cut, not safely, so they hobble them up there and come down on foot. Looking for gold? A holy place? What? Never mind. A fight breaks out and the white man and the child survive, but when he climbs back out, the horses are gone, and from that bit of thievery, he gets the idea for the whole story he'll tell about bandits. It works; people accept his story. And now his only

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problem is that he can't find the valley again. He dies without locating it again. Why didn't he kill the child Carlos?"

Don Carlos sighed. "Please sit down. I want a drink. I seldom do any more, but right now that's what I want."

Ramón mixed drinks for all of them, and then he sat down for the first time since the meeting had started.

Don Carlos drank straight bourbon followed by water. "Have you told Deborah any of this?"

"No."

"It was as you guessed," Don Carlos said finally. "I was back in the formations and didn't even hear the shots. I came out and he was the only one; the others were lying in blood. He raised the gun and aimed at me, and then he put it down again and started to dig graves. I don't know why he didn't shoot. He said from then on I was to be his son and if I ever told anyone he would shoot me too. I believed him. I was five."

"He killed your mother," Constance said said, horrified, "and your father."

"Yes."

"How terrible for you. But I don't understand what that has to do with the present."

Don Carlos shrugged. "How much more have you guessed, or learned?" he asked Charlie.

"He couldn't find the valley again, but you did. I suspect there was gold and that it's under the lake today." Don Carlos nodded slightly. "Yes. You took away enough to get your start, and later you bought the valley, and the first thing you did was dam the stream, to hide the gold vein under many feet of water." Again the old man nodded.

Charlie's voice sobered when he continued. "Years passed and you preserved the valley until one day Ramón appeared. Was he hired as a servant? A business associate? It doesn't matter. He read that history and looked at the waterway and drew the same conclusions I did. You felt that the gorgons had saved your life, there was a mystical connection there. And he found how to capitalize on it." He was aware that Constance was signaling, but this time he ignored it and said bluntly, "I have as much right to call you Daddy as he does."

Don Carlos smiled faintly and lifted his glass, finished his bourbon. "You're a worthy adversary," he said to Charlie. "Will the others unravel it also? How did you discover this so quickly?"

"Ramón left a good trail, just hidden enough to make it look good, not so much that it can't be found. He did a fine job of it." He added dryly, "If you spend enough money you can make the world flat again, enough to convince most people anyway. I spent only a little bit and learned everything Tony's detectives had uncovered, and it hit me that if a man

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of your wealth really wants to hide anything, it gets hidden. I didn't believe a word of it."

Constance looked at Ramón in wonder. "You left false evidence that makes it appear that you are his son? Is that what you did?"

"Sí."

"When?"

"For the last two years we have been working on this."

She felt completely bewildered now. "But why? What on earth for?"

"I knew Tony would investigate Ramón," Don Carlos said. "As soon as he found out I intended to leave the valley to Ramón he would hire investigators to find out why. I tried to come up with something else, but I couldn't think of anything different that he would accept as a good enough reason. He won't talk in public about his father's illicit sex life. I don't want a fight or publicity about this."

"And if you told the truth," Constance said in a low voice, "they could press for a sanity hearing, and probably win." She felt a wave of disgust pass through her at the thought of the hearing, the taunting questions, the innuendoes.

"They might have won such a hearing," Don Carlos said just as quietly as she had spoken.

"And maybe they should have had that chance." Charlie sounded harsh and brusque. "This valley is worth ten million at least, and you're giving it away because he says there's power in the gorgons. Maybe Tony should have his chance."

"Señor," Ramón said, "come to the gorgons at sundown today. And you, Señora. This matter is not completed yet, not yet." He bowed to Don Carlos and Constance and left the room.

They stood up also, Charlie feeling helpless with frustration. "We won't be able to make that," he said to Don Carlos. "Give him our regrets. We're leaving."

"We'll be there," Constance said clearly.

Don Carlos nodded. "Yes, we'll all be there." He looked at Charlie. "I ask only that you say nothing to my daughter or son today. Tomorrow it will be your decision. I ask only for today."

"You're not even offering to buy us," Charlie said bitterly.

"Mr. Meiklejohn, I am extremely wealthy, more than you realize. But over the years I have learned that there are a lot of things I can't buy. That was a surprise to me, as it must be to you, if you believe it at all."

Charlie's frustration deepened; wordlessly he nodded and stalked from the room with Constance close behind him.

"That was brilliant," Constance said, walking by Charlie's side along the lake front.

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"Yeah, I know."

"We're really not finished here." She was not quite pleading with him.

"Right."

She caught his arm and they came to a stop. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have to see it through and I can't say why."

He nodded soberly. "That's what scares me." He never had doubted her, never had thought of her with another man, never had a moment's cloud of jealousy obscure his vision of her. And he knew she felt the same way about him. Their trust in each other was absolute, but . . . He knew there were areas in her psychic landscape that he could not enter, areas where she walked alone, and he knew that when she walked those infinite and infinitely alien paths the things that occupied her mind were also alien and would not permit translation into his mundane world. Standing close to her in the warm sunlight, a gleaming lake at one side of them, luxurious buildings all around, cars, helicopters, computers, servants by the score available, he felt alone, abandoned, lost. She was beyond reach even though her hand was on his arm.

He lifted her hand and kissed the palm. "It's your party."

She blinked rapidly. "We should go back to the house. Tony scares me right now."

They stopped when Tony and Deborah came into view, heading for the area behind the boathouse. Tony was carrying a rifle; Deborah was almost running to keep up, clutching his arm.

She saw Charlie and Constance and turned to them instead. Tony continued, stony-faced.

"What's up?" Charlie asked pleasantly.

"He's going to do target practice. Kill time." She laughed with a tinge of hysteria in her voice.

"Well, I'm looking for a drink," he said, so relaxed and quiet that he appeared lazy.

She walked with them, studying the path they were on. "Tony's so much like Father. It's uncanny how alike they are."

They all started a few seconds later when a shot sounded, echoing and chasing itself around the granite walls of the valley for a long time.

"He's as violent as Father must have been when he was younger," Deborah said as they started to walk again. "More so, maybe. Father is said to have killed a man back in the twenties. I don't know how true it is, but it doesn't really matter. People who tell the story know it was quite possible. He would kill to protect his interests, his family. And so would Tony."

"So would I," Charlie commented.

Constance shivered. Years ago Charlie had insisted that she take self defense classes far past the point where she felt comfortable with them.

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"If anyone ever hurts you," he had said, "you'd better take care of him, because if you don't I'll kill the son of a bitch and that will be murder."

Another shot exploded the quiet and then several more in quick succession. It sounded like thunder in the valley. They paused at the house listening, feeling the vibrations in the air, and then entered.

The fountain splashed; the red tiles on the floor glowed; an orange tree in a pot had opened a bloom or two overnight, and filled the air with a heady fragrance. It was very still.

Deborah paused at the fountain and stared at the water. They had started up the wide stairs; her low voice stopped them.

"When Tony and I used to come here, we just had each other, we were pretty close in those days. He was Lori's age when he . . . when something happened out there. He wouldn't talk about it. He was ashamed because he ran and left me behind, and everything changed with us after that. Just like with Lori. I don't think he's ever gone back. And he shouldn't go back. That target practice . . . he claims an eagle has been snatching chickens. He says he'll shoot it on sight." She bowed her head lower. "How I've prayed for an earthquake to come and shake them all down, turn them to dust!" She jammed her hands into her pockets and walked away without looking back at them.

In their room Constance watched silently as Charlie unlocked his suitcase and brought out his thirty-eight revolver. She went to the window then. "Charlie, just for a minute, accept that there might be some force out there, some power. Tony said places like this are vanishing, remember? He was more right than he knew. They are. What if there are places where you can somehow gain access to the power people sometimes seem to have, like the inhuman strength people sometimes have when there's an emergency, a fire, or something like that."

He made a grunting noise. She continued to look out the window. The sun was getting low, casting long shadows now.

"If people can manipulate that kind of power, why don't they?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "New priests drive out the old priests. New religions replace the old. The conquerers write the books and decide what's true, what's myth. Temples are turned into marketplaces. Roads are built. Admission is charged to holy places and the gum wrappers appear, the graffiti . . . But the stories persist in spite of it all. They persist."

She looked at him when she heard the sound of ice hitting a glass. His face was stony, unknowable.

"When we lose another animal species," she said, almost desperate for his understanding now, "no one knows exactly what we've lost forever. When a forest disappears, no one knows what marvels we might have

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found in it. Plants that become extinct are gone forever. What drugs? What medicines? What new ways of looking at the universe? We can't really know what we've lost. And this valley's like that. Maybe we can't know what it means today, or even next year, but it exists as a possibility for us to know some day, as long as it remains and is not desecrated."

He picked up the two glasses and joined her at the window where he put the glasses on a table and took her into his arms. He held her very close and hard for a minute or two and then kissed her. "Let's have our drink," he said afterward. "And then it'll be about time to mosey on downstairs." And he tried to ignore the ice that was deep within him, radiating a chill throughout his body.

Manuel drove them without a word. He was subdued and nervous. Ahead of the jeep was a Land Rover moving cautiously, avoiding the ruts in the tracks, easing into and out of the holes. Deborah and her father were in it. Also ahead of them was Tony on a horse, in no hurry either. He had a scabbard with the rifle jutting out.

Manuel stopped near the stream where he had parked before, but Deborah drove her father closer to the formations and parked within fifty feet of them. Manuel got a folding chair from the car and set it up; he brought a large Indian blanket and placed it on the back of the chair and then looked at Deborah with a beseeching expression. She shook her head. Silently he went back to the jeep, turned it and drove toward the house. Tony was tying his horse to a hitching post near the mound of the graves.

Don Carlos walked slowly over the rocky ground; there was a line of sweat on his upper lip when he reached the chair and sat down. No one offered to help him, but they all watched until he was settled. Probably, Charlie thought, they knew better than to try to help. If he wanted help he would ask for it politely, matter-of-factly, and unless he did, they waited. A worthy adversary, he thought again. He had no doubt that Don Carlos had killed, maybe more than once, and that he would not hesitate to kill again if he had to. Don Carlos knew, as Charlie did, that the world was not always a nice place.

Tony drew nearer. He and Charlie eyed each other like two alley cats confined in a too-small space, Constance thought, watching everyone, everything closely.

She heard a faint singing and glanced about to see if the others were listening too, to see if Ramón had approached from behind the gorgons. Charlie's expression of lazy inattention did not change; no one moved. They didn't hear it, she realized. The singing was more like chanting, and louder. The earth rolled away from the sun and caught the light in

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the stream at the far end of the valley and turned the water to gold. A dagger of golden light slicing through the cliffs, pointing the way.

It was time. She touched Charlie's arm. When he looked at her, she said softly, "Don't let them follow me. Please wait. I'll be back."

The ice flowed through him, tingled his fingers and toes, froze his heart. He nodded silently. Their gaze held for another moment, then she turned and walked toward the entrance of the gorgons. He had known this was her part, just as she had known; he had been braced, waiting for this. He had not known he would be frozen by the icy fear that gripped him now. She did not look back at him when she reached the right place. She took another step and was out of view. He let out his breath.

A right way, a wrong way. Her pace was steady this time, unhesitating. It was as if the wrong way was barred to her, as if she were being channeled only the right way. The chanting was all around her, inside her; it had an exultant tone.

I'm here, Ramón.

Sí, Señora. I was waiting for you.

Sunlight flowed between the highest pillars, spilled like molten gold downward to touch the path before her. Then the sunlight dimmed and the shadows became deep purple. She continued to walk steadily.

"Look!" Deborah cried, and pointed toward the top of the gorgons.

For a second Charlie thought he saw a human figure; it changed, became an eagle. That damn story she had told, he thought angrily. When he looked back at the others, Tony was at the scabbard, hauling out the rifle. The twilight had turned violet, the shadows very deep and velvety. Charlie watched Tony for a second; very soon it would be too dark to see him. He drew his revolver and fired it into the air. Deborah screamed. Tony straightened, holding the rifle.

"Drop it," Charlie said. "Just let it fall straight down and then get back over here."

Tony walked toward him with the rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Put it down," Charlie said softly.

"I'm going to shoot that goddamn eagle," Tony said. His face was set in hard lines, his eyes narrowed. He took another step.

"No way," Charlie said harshly. "My wife's in there and I don't want any bullets headed anywhere near those formations. Understand?" Tony took another step toward him. Charlie raised the revolver, held it with both hands now. His voice was still soft, but it was not easy or lazy sounding. "One more step with that gun and I'll drop you. Put it down!"

He knew the instant that Tony recognized death staring at him, and the muscles in his neck relaxed, his stomach unclenched. Tony put the rifle down on the ground carefully and straightened up again.

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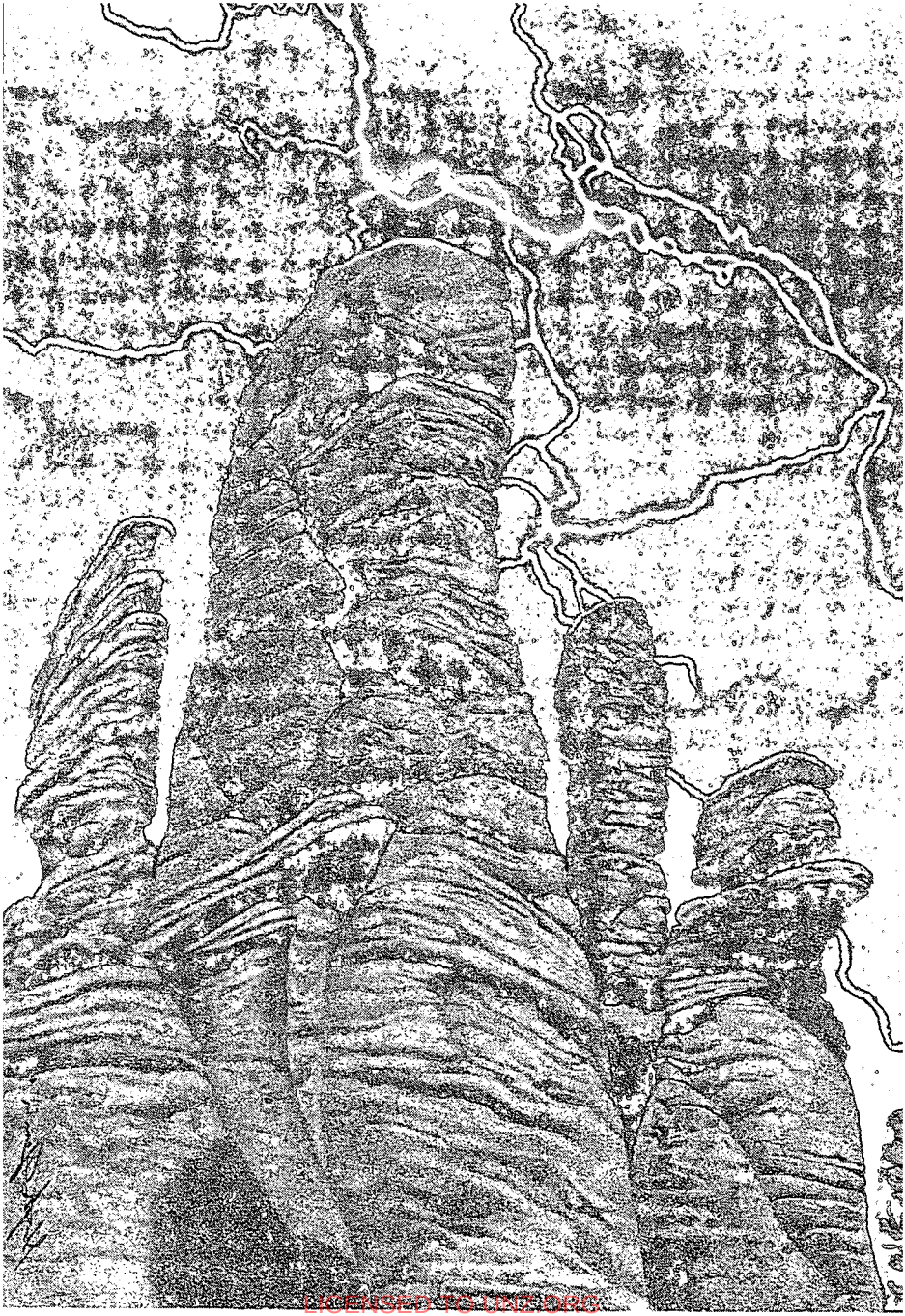

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"Over by your father," Charlie said. He glanced at Don Carlos and Deborah; they were both transfixed, staring at the gorgons behind him. Tony had stopped, also staring. Deborah was the first to move; she sank to the ground by her father's chair. His hand groped for her, came to rest on her head. He took a deep breath and the spell was over.

"It's going to be dark very soon," Charlie said, hating them all, hating this damn valley, the goddamn gorgons. "Until the moon comes up I'm not going to be able to see a damn thing and what that means is that I'll have to listen pretty hard. Tony, will you please join your father and sister? You'd better all try to make yourselves as comfortable as you can because I intend to shoot at any noise I hear of anyone moving around."

Deborah made a choking noise. "Father, please, let's go back to the house. Someone's going to be killed out here!"

Tony began to walk slowly toward them. "You shouldn't have interfered," he said. He sounded very young, very frightened. "I would have ended it."

"Tony, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I brought them here. I wish I'd never seen them, either of them." Deborah was weeping, her face on her father's knee, his hand on her head. "This isn't what I wanted. Dear God, this isn't what I wanted."

Charlie sighed. He felt a lot of sympathy for Tony Wyandot who had come face to face with something he could not handle, could not explain, could not buy or control. In Tony's place he would have done exactly the same thing: try to shoot it out of the sky, protect his property, his sister and father, his sister's child. He would have brought the rifle, but he would have used it, and that made the difference. Don Carlos would have used it, too, if he had decided it was necessary. He had seen Tony take defeat before, with dignity, but this was not like that. He knew that no matter what else happened out here tonight, Tony would always remember that he had not fired the rifle.

Tony reached his father's side and sat on the ground with his knees drawn up, his arms around them. The crisis was over.

The light had long since faded, and with darkness there had come other changes. Constance did not so much think of the differences as feel them, experience and accept them. Her feet seemed far away, hardly attached to her, and her legs were leaden. Each step was an effort, like wading in too-deep water. The air had become dense, a pressure against her that made breathing laborious. She walked with one hand outstretched, not to feel her way, but almost as if she was trying to part the air before her. She saw herself falling forward and the thick air supporting her, wafting her as it might a feather, setting her down gently, an end of the journey, an end of the torture of trying to get enough air.

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Señora.
I'm here, Ramón.
Sí.
It is very hard, Ramón. I'm very tired.
Sí. But you must not stop now.
I know.
Another step. It was agony to lift her foot, to find her foot and make it move. Agony to draw in enough air and then expel it. And again. She was becoming too heavy to move. Too heavy. Stonelike.

"I have to stand up," Don Carlos said. "I'm getting too stiff."

"Do you want to go to the car?" Charlie asked. "You could turn on the heater." They could have turned on the lights, he thought, and knew that even if it had occurred to him earlier he would not have done it.

"No, no. I just want to stand for a minute and then wrap up in the blanket."

"Father," Tony said then, "let me take you back to the house. Keeping vigil in the cold can't be good for you."

"I'm all right," his father said gruffly. "It won't be much longer, I'm sure."

"Father," Tony said after a moment, "don't you see how they're manipulating you? Ramón obviously offered Meiklejohn and his wife more than Deborah agreed to pay them. This isn't going to prove anything, freezing our butts off out here in the cold. Meiklejohn," he said in a louder voice, "I'm going to the car for a flashlight. I intend to go haul your wife out of there and be done with this." There was the sound of shoes scraping rocks.

Charlie sighed. "Tony, knock it off, will you?" he said wearily. "You know I won't let you do that or anything else."

"Sit down, Tony," his father said. It was a father-to-son command, a voice that expected to be obeyed.

Silence hung over them all. "Whatever you say," Tony finally agreed. "This is the stupidest thing I've ever seen."

Charlie loosened his grip on his revolver. Tony was vacillating from the kid who had had his universe shaken to the middle-aged man who could not allow himself to embrace a new belief system, and it obviously was a painful jolt with each switch. He had tried to destroy it and failed, now he had to work even harder to deny it. Charlie couldn't stop feeling that Tony was more in the right than his father. So Constance and Ramón would stroll out eventually and what the hell would that prove? He scowled into the darkness. Meanwhile he intended to preserve order in the cosmos.

There were more stars every time he looked up, as if veil after veil

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were being removed; he never had known there were so many of them. The moon hung over the house, fattening up nicely night after night. And what if she didn't come back? He checked the thought, but there it was, fully formed, articulated in spite of his efforts to suppress it.

What if she found something, after all? Something so wonderful that she couldn't turn her back on it. What if the power she was looking for turned out to be malevolent? He closed his eyes for a moment and then looked at the moon again, trying to make the jagged edge turn into mountains instead of badly torn paper.

She had not completed a movement for a very long time. She had started another step, but it seemed not to end no matter how she struggled. And now she could hardly breathe and the lack of air made her head feel as distant as her feet and hands, and everywhere in her body there was pain, more pain than she had known she could endure.

Will she die?

I do not know.

She didn't know how hard it would be.

One never knows that.

But you did it.

Sí. Over a long period of time. Each time the way one has gone before is easier.

You took the photographs of the gorgons, didn't you?

Sí. And I told Manuel to make certain you saw them.

Twenty-eight pillars. A lunar month. That is very holy, isn't it?

Most holy.

And one must start at sunset and arrive in moonlight. Is that right?

That is correct.

She's taking another step. Actually she hasn't really stopped yet. But it's so slow and so hard.

She forced her leg to move again. Another step. Each step now was a victory in slow motion. So much resistance to overcome. Again she saw herself falling, floating down, down and she yearned to rest in the heavy air, not to move, not to hurt. Another step. The chanting was in her bones; she wanted to chant, too, but she had no breath. The image of herself letting go, falling, was becoming realer each time it came back. It would be so good, so good to let go, to let the heavy air float her to the ground where she could rest.

"What on earth will he do with the valley?" Deborah asked. "Not a resort or anything like that. But what?"

"He'll start a school," Don Carlos said. He sounded faint, his voice quavering a bit.

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Charlie thought of Ramón teaching kids how to walk among the gorgons. His hands clenched hard and he consciously opened them again, flexed his fingers.

"And Constance," Deborah said, almost plaintively, almost jealously, "why her? What is she doing in there with him?"

"She felt the power and didn't run away," Don Carlos said in his faint voice, as if from a great distance, as if his strength were failing too fast for the words to be said. "She is willing to accept the power that she doesn't understand, and through her Ramón will . . . He needed someone to walk the path while he waits. And I . . . I'll be able to rest knowing the valley is in his hands. Good hands. He'll see that is isn't desecrated, he'll have the strength to take care of it. After tonight he'll be able to teach others."

"What difference does it make?" Tony demanded. "Let him do what he wants with the rotten valley. I sure don't intend to spend any time here ever again."

Charlie nodded. The denial was complete. Tony had saved his soul the only way he could. Everyone was clearly visible with the moon almost directly overhead and brilliant. The dimensions kept changing with the changing light, he thought. Right now the valley looked as wide as a plain, and the house close enough to touch. His eyes were playing tricks. He had slept so little the night before, and the altitude was strange.

For nearly an hour he had been fighting the idea that she really would not come back, that when it became daylight he would have to go in after her, and he would find her huddled at the base of one of those pillars. Twice he had started to go in, and each time he had forced himself to stop, to wait. He got up and stretched and started to walk toward the meadow, anything was better than sitting on the rock much longer.

When I was a little girl I was so certain that if I could be Beauty, I'd recognize the nobility of the Beast with no trouble at all. How I wanted to be Beauty.

I am sure you recognize evil very well.

Not as well as I should. What if she does this thing tonight, and uses what she gains for evil?

His laugh was gentle. *We talked to you Señora. We measured your reverance for the power here. If we were wrong then one of us will certainly die this night.*

Is this an evil thing, Ramón? To let her walk the path in ignorance, is that evil?

You are not ignorant.

But I'm here and she's there alone.

That is your choice.

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No. I can be one or the other.

There is no other, only the one.

Now she knew she had to stop, she could not go on. She shuddered. She put out both hands so that they would break her fall. And she heard her own voice very clearly, "Another step, Constance. One more. Come on!"

One more. Suddenly she was dazzled by silvery light. It struck her in the face like a physical substance and she could see out over the valley in all directions. She laughed.

At the hitching post Charlie turned and came to a dead stop, even his heart stopped. In the center of the formations, on top of the highest of the gorgons, were two figures, Constance and Ramón, shining in the moonlight. He felt the world swim out from under him and caught the post for support, closed his eyes very hard. When he opened them again, the figures were gone. He raced back toward the gorgons. When he got there, Ramón was emerging carrying Constance.

Very gently he transferred her to Charlie's arms. Charlie watched him walk to Don Carlos and lean over him. It was very clear in the moonlight. After a moment, Don Carlos stood up.

"I didn't ask for this," he whispered, and his voice carried as if he were shouting. "I made no demands, asked for nothing."

"It is given," Ramón said. "Now we must get the Señora to the house and to bed."

"Is she going to be all right?" Don Carlos asked.

"Sí. She is suffering from shock right now."

And Don Carlos moved without his cane, Charlie realized. Constance stirred and pressed her face against his chest. She sighed a long plaintive breath.

Are you sure, Señora? You don't have to go back now. You can stay here.

Oh no! I give it all to you, Ramón. I don't want it. I told Charlie I'd come back. That's what I want.

You can never give it all away, Señora. Some of the power will cling to you forever. Some day perhaps you will come home again.

She took another deep breath, inhaling the familiar smell of Charlie's body, and she let herself go, let herself fall into the sleep she yearned for. Charlie walked to the car with her in his arms almost blinded by tears he could not explain or stop. ●

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(from page 20)

SOLUTIONS TO INNER PLANETS QUIZ

1. Until 1965 astronomers believed that Mercury's rotation period was exactly the same as its period of revolution around the sun. If true, Mercury would keep one hemisphere permanently facing the sun, just as our moon keeps one face always toward the earth. "Mercury has the distinction," the British astronomer Fred Hoyle wrote as late as 1962, "of possessing not only the hottest place but also the coldest place in the whole planetary system."

Using radar reflections from opposite sides of Mercury, astronomers discovered in 1965 that Mercury and the sun are in a stable 3-to-2 resonance lock. The little planet turns three times during every two orbits. There *is* no twilight zone.

2. Until about two years ago many astronomers believed that Venus, like Mercury, also kept one face forever toward the sun. This too was accepted by many science fiction writers. "For Venus, of course, has no rotation," wrote Stanley G. Weinbaum in *The Lotus Eaters,* "and hence no alternate days and nights. One face is forever sunlit, and one forever dark, and only the planet's libration gives the twilight some semblance of season."

Radar measurements in 1962 revealed two amazing facts. Venus is the only planet in the solar system that spins backward with respect to the other planets. (Uranus has an ambiguous spin direction; its axis is so nearly parallel with the plane of the ecliptic that either pole can be called north.) On Venus the sun rises in the west.

Venus orbits the sun in about 225 earth days. Incredible as it may seem, the radar measurements of 1962 showed that the planet's spin period is about 243 earth days, or longer than its year. If the spin is exactly 243.16 days, as is suspected, it means that Venus and the earth are in a 1-to-1 resonance lock similar to the earth-moon lock. In other words, Venus always keeps the same face toward the *earth!* If you were on Venus, and the earth were at the zenith, it would permanently stay there with respect to your position.

3. If the earth were reduced to the size of a billiard ball, it would feel smoother than an ivory ball. If the orbit were drawn to scale on a small sheet of paper, it would be impossible to distinguish it from a circle. The path is indeed an ellipse, but its deviation from the circle is too small to be noticeable.

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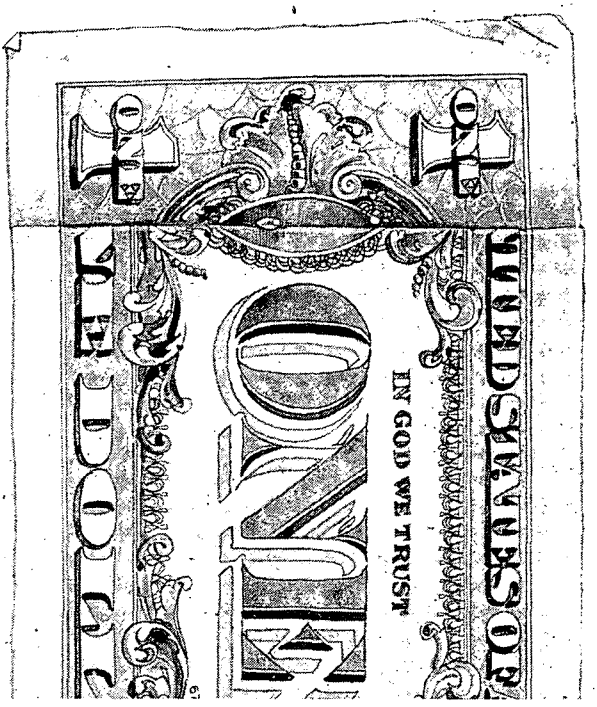
4. Each end of the green side of a dollar bill can be pleated as shown in the illustration below to show the face of a Martian. This suggests an amusing puzzle to spring on friends. How many eyes are on a dollar bill? Everybody counts the two eyes of Washington and the big eye at the top



art: Arthur George

of the pyramid. The less obvious eye on the eagle makes four. That's as far as most people go. No, you insist, there are eight eyes. Pleat the bill at the two ends to prove it.

Now for four more questions about the same planets.

5. Does Mercury have a magnetic field?

6. Rearrange the letters of "Venus" to make another English word. The word isn't common, but you'll find it in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*.

7. Everybody knows that the moon's gravity causes the earth's seas to rise on the side facing the moon. Why is there simultaneously a high tide on the opposite side of the earth?

8. You meet a lady who claims she comes from Mars. Indeed, she tells you, she was born there. Could she be telling the truth? You'll find the answers to these questions on page 97.

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by Isaac Asimov

Alistair Tobago Crump, VI was a frightful bore who put even the uninspiring members of the Eden club to sleep. Perhaps this was one problem Azazel could solve without creating undue side effects . . .

LOGIC IS LOGIC

art: Hank Jankus

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George was not one of those craven souls who felt that the fact that he was not paying for a meal deprived him of the right to criticize it. He expressed his disappointment to me, therefore, with as much delicacy as he could—or as much as he thought I deserved, which is not quite the same thing, of course.

"This smorgasbord," he said, "is distinctly inferior. The meatballs are not hot enough, the herring is not salty enough, the shrimp are not crisp enough, the cheese is not sharp enough, the deviled eggs are not peppery enough, the—"

I said, "George, that's the third heaping plate you've devoured. One more bite and you will have to undergo surgery to release the gastric pressure. Why are you eating so much of this inferior material?"

George said, haughtily, "Is it for me to humiliate my host by markedly refusing to eat his food?"

"It's not my food; it's the restuarant's."

"The owner of this miserable hovel is he to whom I am referring.—Tell me, old man, why don't you belong to some good club?"

"I? Pay enormous sums for dubious returns?"

"I mean a *good* club, which I can then grace as your guest in return for a sumptuous meal. But no," he added querulously, "that is a mad dream. What good club would compromise its position by allowing you to be a member?"

"Any club that would allow you as a guest, would certain allow me—" I began, but George was already lost in reminiscence.

"I remember," he said, eyes glistening, "when I dined at least once a month at a club that featured the most lavish and the most intricate buffet that ever graced any groaning board since the days of Lucullus."

"I presume you freeloaded as someone's guest."

"I don't know that that is a necessary presumption, but, by sheer chance, you happen to be correct. It was Alistair Tobago Crump, VI, who was actually the member and, which is more important, my occasional host."

"George," I said, "is this going to be another story in which you and Azazel combine to hurl some poor soul down a declivity of misery and despair in your misguided efforts to help him?"

"I don't know what you mean. We granted him his heart's desire out of sheer kindness and the abstract love of humanity—and my somewhat more concrete love of the buffet. But let me tell you the story from the beginning."

Alistair Tobago Crump, VI, had been a member of the Eden from birth, for his father, Alistair Tobago Crump, V, entered his son's name on the rolls as soon as a personal inspection assured him that the doctor's initial

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estimate of the infant's sex had been correct. Alistair Tobago Crump, V, had similarly been entered by his father, and so on, back to the days when Bill Crump, while sleeping off a drunken stupor, had been pressed into the British navy just in time to find himself an indignant member of the crew of one of the ships of the fleet that captured New Amsterdam from the Dutch in 1664.

The Eden, as it happens, is the most exclusive club on the North American continent. So haughty is it that its bare existence is known only to its members and a very few guests. Even I do not know its location, for I was always taken there, blindfolded, in a hansom cab with opaque windows. I can only tell you that, for a period of time during the final approach, the horse's hooves passed over a stretch of cobbled road.

No one could belong to the Eden whose ancestry did not extend into the colonial period on both sides of the family. Nor is it ancestry alone that counts. There must be no smudge on the escutcheon. George Washington was blackballed by unanimous vote since he had undeniably rebelled against his sovereign lord.

This same requirement was maintained for any guests, but that did not exclude me, of course. Unlike you, I am not a first-generation immigrant from Dobrudja, or Herzegovina, or some equally unlikely place. My ancestry is impeccable, since my forebears have infested the territory of this nation since the 17th Century, and since they, one and all, avoided the sins of rebellion, disloyalty and unAmericanism during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, by cheering both sides impartially as their armies marched past.

My friend, Alistair, was inordinately proud of his own membership. Many a time and oft did he say to me (for he was one of your classic bores and frequently repeated himself), "George, the Eden is the bone and sinew of my being, the core of my existence. If I had all that wealth and power could bring me, and had not Eden, I would be as naught."

Of course, Alistair *did* have all that wealth and power could bring him, for another requirement for membership at the Eden was great wealth. The annual dues, if nothing else, made that imperative. And again that, in itself, was not enough. The wealth had to be inherited, it could not be earned. Any trace of actually working in return for payment made one clearly ineligible for membership. It was only the fact my father had thoughtlessly forgotten to leave me several millions of dollars that kept me out of the club, even though I had never undergone the disgrace of working for—

Don't say 'I know that,' old man. There's no way you could know that.

Naturally, there was no objection to a member augmenting his income by interesting methods that did not involve labor-for-pay. There were

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always such things as stock-manipulation, tax-evasion, influence-peddling, and other clever devices that come as second nature to the rich.

This was all taken seriously by members of Eden. There had been cases of Edenites who, having lost their money through unaccountable attacks of momentary honesty, preferred to starve slowly to death rather than go to work and lose their membership. Their names are still mentioned in hushed tones and plaques in their honor are to be found in the clubhouse.

No, they couldn't borrow money from fellow-members, old man. It's so like you to suggest that. Every member of Eden knows you don't borrow from a rich man when there are uncounted numbers of poor people waiting anxiously in line for the chance to be defrauded. The Bible reminds us that "ye have the poor with you always" and the members of Eden are strong on religion.

And yet Alistair was not entirely happy, for it is an unfortunate fact that the membership of the Eden tended to avoid him. I have told you he was a bore. He had no fund of conversation, no cleverness, no opinion of note. In fact, even in the midst of a membership whose total fund of wit and originality was on a fourth-grade grammar-school level, he stood out as remarkably dull.

You can imagine his frustration as he sat there night after night at the Eden, alone amidst the crowd. The ocean of conversation, such as it was, washed over him but left him dry. Yet he never missed a night at the club. He even had himself carried there during a violent attack of dysentery in order not to break his record as "Iron Man Crump." This was abstractly admired by the membership, but, for some reason, not widely appreciated.

To be sure, he had the occasional privilege of having me as his guest at the Eden. My ancestry was impeccable, my aristocratic record as a convinced non-earner was the admiration of all, and in return for the finest of food, and the most cobwebby of ambience, all at Crump's expense, I went to the trouble of talking to him and laughing at his perfectly terrible jokes. I found myself pitying the poor fellow from the very bottom of my capacious heart.

Somehow, there ought to be some way of making him the life of the party, the toast of Eden, the man with whom every member longed to be. I pictured aged and respectable Edenites engaged in spavined fisticuffs for the honor of sitting next to him at the evening meal.

After all, Alistair was the very picture of respectability, and all that an Edenite should be. He was tall, he was slim, his face had the look of a ruminative horse, he had lank blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and the dull look of formal, conservative orthodoxy of a man whose ancestors had all

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thought sufficiently well of themselves to marry within the clan. All he lacked was any trace of anything in the least interesting to say or do.

But that could surely be fixed. It was a case for Azazel.

For once, Azazel was not annoyed with me for bringing him through the space-warp from his planet. He had been at a banquet of sorts, it seemed, and it had been his turn to pick up the check and I had pulled him away five minutes before that check was due to arrive. He chuckled in a falsetto ululation for, as you know, he is only two centimeters high.

He said, "I will return fifteen minutes later and by that time, someone else will have committed himself to pay that check."

I said, "How will you account for your absence?"

He drew himself up to his full micro-height, twitching his tail. "I will tell them the truth; that I was called away to a conference with an extra-Galactic monster of extraordinary stupidity, who was in dire need of my intelligence. What do you want this time?"

I told him and to my amazement, he burst into tears. At least he sprayed tiny little red spicules from his eyes. I *suppose* they were tears. One got into my mouth and tasted terrible—rather like cheap red wine—or like cheap red wine would taste if I ever allowed myself to taste it.

"How sad," he said. "I know the case of a worthy entity who is constantly snubbed by others who are far his inferiors. I find there is nothing more tragic."

"Who would that be? The entity snubbed, that is."

"I!" he said, thumping his tiny little chest till it squeaked.

"I can't imagine that," I said. "You?"

"I can't either," he said. "But it's true, just the same. What does this friend of yours do that shows any promise?"

"Well, he does tell jokes. Or he tries to. They're awful. He drones them out, circles the point aimlessly, then forgets it. I have frequently seen a joke of his make a strong man weep."

Azazel shook his head. "Bad. Very bad. Now I happen to be an excellent joke-spinner. Did I ever tell you about the time a plocks and a jinniram were engaged in mutual andesantoree and one of them said—"

"Yes, you did," I said, lying strenuously, "but let us get on to the case of Crump."

Azazel said, "Is there any simple technique that can improve the telling of a joke?"

"A certain glibness, of course," I said.

"Of course," said Azazel. "A mere divalination of the vocal cords could take care of that—assuming you barbarians have such things."

"We do. And then, of course, the ability to handle an accent."

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"An accent?"

"Substandard English. Foreigners who have not learned the language as infants but who pick it up in later life, invariably mispronounce the vowels, miss out on word order, break up the grammar, and so on."

A look of sheer horror crossed Azazel's tiny face. "But that's a capital offense," he said.

"Not on this world," I said. "It should be, but it isn't."

Azazel shook his head sadly. "Has this friend of yours ever heard these atrocities you call accents?"

"Certainly. Anyone living in New York hears accents of all types, at all times. It is correct English such as my own that one hardly ever hears."

"Ah," said Azazel, "it is then only a matter of scapulating the memory."

"*What* the memory?"

" 'Scapulate,' a form of sharpening, from the word 'scapos' referring to the teeth of a zum-eating dirigin."

"And that will make it possible for him to tell jokes with an accent?"

"Only with those accents he has happened to hear in the course of his life. My powers, after all, are not unlimited."

"Then scapulate away."

A week later I met Alistair Tobago Crump, VI, on Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street, and searched his face in vain for any signs of recent triumph.

"Alistair," I said, "have you been telling any jokes lately?"

"George," he said, "no one will listen. There are times when I think I don't tell jokes any better than the average man."

"Well, then, I tell you what. You come with me to a small establishment I know. I will give you a humorous introduction and then you stand up and say anything that's in your mind."

I assure you, old man, it was not easy to persuade him to do this. I had to make use of the full force of my magnetic personality. In the end, though, I won out.

I took him to a rather crummy dive I happened to know. I can describe it best by saying it is rather reminiscent of the places you take me to dinner.

I also happened to know the manager of the dive, which was its great advantage, and I persuaded him to allow me to experiment.

At 11 P.M., when the revelry was at its height, I rose to my feet and cowed the audience with my air of dignity. There were only eleven people present, but I felt that was enough with which to experiment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "we have in our presence a gentleman of great intellect, a master of our language, whom I'm sure you would all love to meet. He is Alistair Tobago Crump, VI, and he is Emersonian

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Professor of English at Columbia College, and author of 'How To Speak Perfect English.' Professor Crump, will you arise and say a few words to the assembled intellectuals, please?"

Crump arose, looking rather confused, and said, "Leesten, denk you ull var' moch."

Well, old man, I've heard you tell jokes in what purports to be a Yiddish accent, but you could pass for a Harvard graduate in comparison to Crump. The thing is that Crump *looked* exactly as you would expect an Emersonian Professor of English to look. And to stare at that woebegone inbred face and suddenly hear a phrase in pure Yinglish, knocked the breath out of every person there simultaneously. Such an aroma of alcoholic onions filled the air as you would not believe. And that was followed by a roar of laughter that built up into hysterics.

A look of mild surprise crossed Crump's face. He said to me, in a beautiful Swedish sing-song, which I won't try to reproduce, "I don't usually get quite *this* strong a reaction."

"Never mind," I said, "keep on talking."

It meant waiting for the laughter to stop which took a while, and then he began telling jokes in Irish brogues, in Scottish burrs, in cockney, Mitteleuropean, Spanish, Greek. His specialty was clearly Brooklynese, however—your own noble, nearly-native tongue, old man.

After that I let him spend some hours at Eden every evening and after dinner I would take him to the establishment. Word of mouth spread the tale. That first night, as I said, the audience had been a sparse one, but in no time at all, we had people outside clamoring to get in—and in vain.

Crump took it calmly. In fact, he seemed downcast. He said, "Look, there's no point in wasting all this excellent material of mine on ordinary yokels. I want to show my skill to my fellow-members of Eden. They wouldn't listen to my jokes because it had never occurred to me to tell them in dialect. In fact, I didn't realize I could, which just shows the unbelievable self-underestimation into which a quietly humorous and witty fellow such as myself can fall. Just because I am not raucous and do not push myself forward—"

He was speaking in his best Brooklynese, which grates unpleasantly on any delicate ear, if you don't mind my saying so, old man, and so I hastened to assure him that I would take care of everything.

I told the manager of the establishment of the wealth of the members of Eden, neglecting to mention that they were as parsimonious as they were rich. The manager, drooling slightly, sent out complimentary tickets to lure them in. This was on my advice, for I well knew that no true Edenite could resist a free show, especially as I carefully initiated a rumor that stag films would be shown.

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The membership showed up in force, and Crump expanded at the sight. "Now I can do it," he said. "I've got a Korean accent that will kill them."

He also had a southern drawl and a Maine twang that had to be heard to be believed.

The men of Eden, for a few minutes, sat in stony silence, and I had the terrible notion that they didn't understand Crump's subtle humor. But they were only paralyzed with astonishment, and as the astonishment wore off, they began to laugh.

Portly bellies shook, pince-nez's fell off, white muttonchops waved in the breeze. Every possible disgusting sound, from the dry falsetto cackles of some to the oleaginous bass mumblings of others, that could serve to make life hideous, proceeded to do so.

Crump expanded at this proper appreciation and the manager, feeling certain that he was at the entrance-gate to countless wealth, rushed up to Crump at the intermission and said, "My boy, my boy, I know you asked only for the opportunity to display your art and that you are, and remain, above the filth that people call money, but I can't allow that any longer. Call me foolish. Call me mad. But here, here, my boy, take this check. You have earned it, every penny of it. Lavish it as you will." And with the generosity of the typical entrepreneur who expects millions in return, he pushed into Crump's hand a check for twenty-five dollars.

Well, as I see it, that was the beginning. Crump went on into fame and satisfaction, the idol of the nightclub circuit, the admired of all beholders. Money poured in on him and since he was wealthy beyond the dreams of Croesus due to the industrious orphan-defrauding of his ancestors, he needed none of it, and passed it all on to his business manager—in short, me. Within a year, I was a millionaire, and so there goes your characteristically idiotic theory that Azazel and I bring only ill-fortune.

I stared at George sardonically. "Since you are several million dollars short of being a millionaire, George, I presume you are now going to tell me it was all a dream."

"Not at all," said George, haughtily. "The story is perfectly true, as is every word I utter. And the ending I have just outlined is precisely what would have happened if Alistair Tobago Crump, VI, had not been a fool."

"A fool, was he?"

"Certainly. I leave it to you. Overcome by pride in the munificent twenty-five dollar check he had received, he framed it, brought it to the Eden and fatuously displayed it to all. What choice did the members have? He had earned money. He had been paid for his labors. They were forced to expel him. And Crump, deprived of his club, went to the injudicious length of having a fatal heart attack in consequence and there

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went my million dollars. Surely none of that was the fault of Azazel or myself."

"But if he framed the check, he wasn't really taking any money."

George raised a magisterial right hand as he shoved the bill for the evening meal in my direction with his left. "It is the principle of the thing. I told you the Edenites were strong on religion. When Adam was expelled from Eden, God told him that from then on he would have to work in order to make a living. I think the exact words were 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.' It follows then that, in reverse, if you work to make a living you have to be expelled from Eden. Logic is logic." ●

PALEONTOLOGISTS WHO LIVE IN BACKWARD TIME

brush the dusts back on,
pull back the hammer and
unpick bones, to seal
them in stone,
into flattening folds
and retreating riverbeds
where these all realign,
sprout sinew, rear up
in a pterosaur
wing tip or lower jaw

and every untime they do
unbinds the reverence
unbinds an awe
of death

—Robert Frazier

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IN THE REALM OF THE HEART, IN THE WORLD OF THE KNIFE

by Wayne Wightman

art: Janet Aulisio

The author says he likes to write stories about people who have to make difficult choices, and that he is especially interested in those things we think make life worth living. This is his second appearance in *IAsfm.*

Obese and sweating, Errit Stattor strolled smiling through his outer office, reviewing those who served him. He tried to be humble. The archaic incandescent lighting made his aides look paper-yellow, hollow-eyed, and slack. When he entered those immense and weirdly anachronistic stained-glass doors, all voices ceased, all movement stopped, and in a single motion, everyone stood. They bowed, and as he passed by them, he smiled and nodded.

"Please," he said, "please sit—these formalities . . ."

But they remained standing and bowing. Stattor sighed. "Your devotion impresses me," he said, "but . . . please . . ."

No one sat, and he was impressed, but today, as he reviewed them, smiling, the fat of his cheeks pushed up in tight sweat-sheened balls beneath his eyes, he had more reason to appear pleased than they could know. Today, at 11:00 A.M., Usko Imani was going to be brought to him. She was the last woman who had voluntarily made love to him, and he had not seen her in twenty years, as of today. Seeing her, speaking to her, was to be a sort of anniversary gift to both of them. It was one of the several loose ends in his life that remained to be tied up.

As Stattor crossed through his office, sweat ran in crooked streams out of his scalp, and he smelled of deceased generations of sweat-loving bac-

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teria. It was unfortunate, he knew; he did what he could about it, but nothing helped much. No one mentioned it.

With the yellow light hazing the air, Stattor's two dozen aides remained standing beside their desks, bowed and dead-faced, waiting for him to complete his passage among them.

Supervisor Stattor surveyed the nerve center of his domain, the place where he could order any action on any of twenty thousand worlds, and today he felt not only a peculiar sense of serenity beyond that which he normally experienced, but he also felt one of those increasingly frequent twinges of immortality. It seemed as though something grandly mysterious was about to happen to him. He suspected that it would not happen to him today—but then, it *would* happen, and it *would* be a surprise. . . . And it would be strange and wonderful, and this entire branch of humanity would know of it, because he was Errit Stattor, Supervisor of United Tarassis, and he had opened to mankind the treasures of alien technologies, and he was admired and respected on more worlds than he could comprehend. Without him, they knew and he knew that they would have become backward, a slave race, trashlife.

"Please," he said, "be comfortable. Treat me as anyone else."

No one moved, and Stattor appreciated their devotion.

He nodded and smiled at his personnel and left them in the yellow-aired room. The crystalline door of his private office sensed his presence, opened, and he passed grandly through it.

Alone, he folded forward and clasped his distended guts in his arms. His intestines felt like a tangle of fire, and waves of pain flowed up his legs and pooled in his thighs, reservoirs of agony. Being chain-whipped, he thought, would probably not hurt more. After so many organ replacements, so much reconstructive surgery, and with fifteen or twenty biomechs floating somewhere beneath his tides of fat, with all this, he could not walk far, or sleep well, or think as sharply as he once could. But he no longer needed to.

From a dozen light-years above the hub of the galaxy, in this space station that housed over 14,000 workers, he directed the ebb and flow of wealth and workers from world to world, eliminating obstacles and annoyances as this part of humanity moved in a swarming tide across the galaxy.

Stattor forced himself erect. The sight of his office usually soothed him. Standing just inside the doorway, on the carpeted area, where those who came to see him would stand, he relished the awesomeness of his design. The entry area was carpeted with the textured skin of some alien beast or other, but this was just a small part of his vast office, which was inside a transparent blister on one of the non-rotating rings of the station. To approach Stattor's gleaming desk, one had to step onto the thermoplast

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floor where underfoot, looking close enough to touch, stars and gasses defiled the purity of the void.

When one came to do business with Stattor, to ask his aid or intercession, one felt suspended in space, and Stattor would sit at his shining black desk, smiling, saying, "Please, allow me to help you. Ask what you need." And behind him, through the transparency, the frozen hub of the galaxy was smeared across half the sky. Just above his head and to the right was a globular cluster that looked too perfect to be real. Sitting there, like that, listening and smiling, Stattor listened and judged.

But now he hobbled to his specially designed chair, sank into it, and felt it adjust to him, caress him, comfort and hold him.

He rummaged through one of the desk drawers, pawing over his pharmaceuticals for help with his legs. They had been tingling since he had awakened. His right shoulder felt bruised for some unknown reason, and for three days now, his hands trembled. There were so many things in the drawer that he knocked it shut and leaned back and tried to breathe deeply. Phlegm rattled in his throat.

He thought of food. Sometimes that helped. He so loved to eat, to chew, and churn his tongue through the flavors and then to feel them slide down his throat and enter his body. . . .

He had eaten with Usko Imani many times, long ago, in other days. Her fingers were long, delicate, and had wrapped like flower vines around . . .

He thought of food. He knew it was a weakness. Aside from opening up a new world of technology, Stattor loved nothing more than feeling thick sweet creams slicking the insides of his cheeks—or the oily spiciness of rare meat flooding across his tongue and through his mouth. In the privacy of his opulent living quarters, he would sometimes hold in his hand a cluster of some exotic fruit and slowly crush it and drink the cool juices from the cup of his palm. He adored these moments.

His stomach rumbled and burned. He wondered if Usko Imani was as close to death as he was. She had been imprisoned for seventeen years now at a labor camp. Most inmates lived only half that long. Something tickled in Stattor's throat. As he coughed it up and reswallowed it, needles of pain arced from his chest down to his arms. From his tunic he took a beta-blocker and swallowed it dry. When the pain subsided, he reached, without looking, to touch the call button on the autovox. He wanted to call Zallon, his chief aide, to ask about Usko, but his fingers missed the call button completely and fell through empty air.

The autovox had been moved.

Zallon had rearranged the position of the autovox without asking him.

Stattor remembered mentioning two days previously that it sometimes hurt his arm to reach across the desk to it. So Zallon had taken it upon

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himself to move it to the corner of the desk nearest Stattor's right hand. And he hadn't asked. And, Stattor noticed, in its current position, it blocked his view through the curved plastic bubble of a particularly attractive nebula, the Stattor Nebula. From the comfort of his chair, he could only see the upper right corner of it.

What had Zallon been thinking?

Stattor fumbled his numbed fingers over the face of the autovox and depressed the call button. "Zallon," he said, "come to me."

The door to the outer office instantly irised open and the chief of staff entered, his flat eyes shrouded in the shadows of his eye-ridges. His eyelids were very thick, as though he had some exotic disease. "Yes sir?"

"The autovox . . ." Stattor said, raising his eyebrows and putting an apologetic smile on his face. "I reached for it, and . . . it had been moved. I know you must have gone to some trouble." He imagined that he looked like anyone's uncle.

Zallon's throat convulsed as he swallowed. "If it caused you any inconvenience, Supervisor, I deeply regret—"

"Is Usko Imani going to be here by eleven?"

"Yes, Supervisor." His shrouded eyes glittered with fear. "She's on the station now. They're cleaning her up."

"Fine." Stattor smiled pleasantly at Zallon. "Bring me the dispersal list. I'll look at that before she gets here."

"Yes, Supervisor." Zallon nodded and quickly departed. The crystalline door irised shut behind him.

Again, Stattor glanced at the repositioned autovox. It completely blocked the lower left corner of his nebula. He deeply regretted that, and something would have to be done. There were few pleasures left in his life, and the view from his desk was one of them. Zallon should have consulted him. Something should be done.

He leaned back in his chair and it adjusted to him. Lately he had felt more comfortable alone, much unlike the old days. In his thoughts he saw the face of Usko Imani, twenty years ago, when he had last seen her, several years before he had ordered her arrest and imprisonment at an outer world mining camp where alien lowlife and criminal humans worked side by side, clawing chromium ore out of subterranean dirt. Now, today, he would see her again and have the chat he had planned for two decades.

Ghostly silent, Zallon returned and moved across the carpeted entryway onto the transparent floor. He laid the list precisely in front of Stattor.

"If my actions have displeased you, Supervisor—"

At the slightest motion of Stattor's head, Zallon left the office, silent as air, the door closing behind him.

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Usko Imani had been beautiful. Once they had made love, and he remembered those moments more clearly than he remembered the day he made himself Supervisor of United Tarassis. He remembered her hands and her lips—he remembered the way she laughed and the way, that one time, her hands had touched him.

He fingered the dispersal list, not looking at it, and let his thoughts drift over the early years when she and Stattor and a handful of others had struggled in the corporate courts, suing for the right to borrow technology from alien cultures, and then maneuvering to set up United Tarassis. She had been undeviating in her loyalty and purpose and as idealistic as she had been beautiful. And, in the end, after the tired degenerate government had granted their petition, United Tarassis moved on hundreds of alien worlds, taking what was useful and selling the rest. Finally, United Tarassis had become the government.

He remembered the day of the court's final decision in their favor . . . they had celebrated, he and Usko alone, and without expecting it or knowing what it would lead to, they had made love—for the first and only time. He had been different then. The world had been new and wide and various, and in the unknown he saw beauty and richness and joy.

His eyes stopped on the repositioned autovox. He wondered what other action Zallon might be capable of without telling him.

He gazed at the list lying on the desk before him . . . the dispersal list . . . it consisted of the names of those who no longer functioned effectively in the workings of the corporation. It was a grim task, looking over the names—but he did it, sparing some nameless underling the guilt of passing the names on to the Action Committee. But Stattor was used to it. These were the names of the unreliable and the potentially unreliable who would be sedated and shot into the core of the space station where their component molecules would separate and give up their energies to power the station's lights for several evenings, provide heat and comfort, and enable the work of probing distant worlds to go on. Here, nothing was wasted.

He usually gave the lists only a cursory glance and then forwarded them to the Action Committee. It was his prerogative, of course, to put a checkmark beside the name of any person he decided to exempt from execution.

Most of the names were unfamiliar. Blisson, E., . . . Lanyon, R., . . . Blodian, A.

Aros Blodian was on the list? Stattor remembered him from twenty or more years ago. He and Usko and a dozen others had worked for the same goals, for the advancement of humankind through the use of alien resources. But then . . . Stattor vaguely remembered ordering Blodian

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to be confined for some reason or other—but the recollection was unclear. And now one of the Division heads was asking for Blodian's dispersal.

Stattor turned his chair to face the galaxy-smeared void. Those old days always seemed warm and fragrant when Stattor thought of them, and for a few moments, the constriction in his chest loosened and he could breathe easier. Blodian had been one of inner members of the movement until . . . until what?

Stattor gazed above the glow of the galaxy's hub into the emptiness and remembered one evening in particular, sitting with Aros beside a rippled lake, the purple sky paling to a cream color over the rounded mountains. They had been discussing the construction of probe stations like the one in which Stattor now sat and meditated on the loose ends of his life.

He and Aros were on a planet that had evolved only vegetation, and there, amid the tree-ferns and thick-leafed shrubs, beside the warm water of the lake, they had felt comfortable to sit without much talking and to listen to the water lap at the pebbled shore. The air had been rich with the smells of earth, and for the moment, everything was beauty, quiet, and pleasure.

And Usko had been there, he remembered suddenly. Yes, Usko had been there, and he remembered her laughing—she had come up from the shore, laughing and carrying a thick bouquet of colorful weeds. How strange that he should remember such details now, from so long ago and so far away, from such an ancient evening.

Stattor took up a pen and started to place a checkmark next to Blodian's name. For old times' sake. He had been a friend. And now he was probably old and gnarled and with none of the fire he had had in former days when he would take on the most dangerous of schemes, and through courage alone, force them to success.

The autovox chirped.

Stattor reached for it, without looking, and his hand dropped through the air, touching nothing. He glared at the machine.

"What," he said, barely parting his teeth when he spoke.

Zallon's voice was restrained. "Usko Imani has arrived, Supervisor."

Stattor inhaled deeply. His stomach rumbled and his back ached. What would she think of him? Would she recoil at his fatness? He wanted her to like him. Would she be gray and old and unrecognizable?

Stattor tried to calm himself by gazing again into space.

The churning hub of the galaxy lay frozen before him. It seemed as though it had paused for the period of his lifetime so he could look upon it, become familiar with it, and use it for humankind. Years ago, he could stare at those trailing billows of stars for hours, but, now, in truth, the part he most liked to look upon was the area above the galaxy, beyond

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the sprinkle of globular clusters, higher up, where there was darkness, emptiness, and only the occasional blemish of a distant smear of stars. The smoothness of the black, the absence of matter, of life, those were the things that now appealed to him. Something grand approached.

Stattor turned his chair back to face the door from the waiting room, positioned his feet beneath his weight, braced his hands on his desk, and stood.

In the instant before he spoke to the autovox, he thought of her lips and hands, of how once she had looked at him and how once she had touched him. . . .

"Send her in," he said.

In the several seconds before the door irised open, he started to feel oppressed by the heaviness of his body, and he felt the rolls of fat pressing against each other around his neck and around his stomach. A dozen pains sparkled in his ankles, and it was no wonder, he thought, that his body was trying so desperately to die.

The door opened.

Usko Imani had been a square-shouldered, strong-bodied woman with long, tight-curled blond hair, a woman whose footing on the earth had been as solid as her belief in Stattor and the blending of alien and human technologies. As long as Stattor had known her, all those years, he had never suspected that she ever felt any doubt about what she was doing or her purpose in the world. When it came to her belief in utilizing alien ways, she never hesitated, whatever it cost her.

But now she hesitated. She stood in the doorway, stooped and gray-skinned, her hair a thinning shag of frizz across parts of her scalp. Inside the person who stood on the carpeted entryway, staring at the transparent floor before her, Stattor could detect only the faintest ghost of who she had been.

She glanced to either side of the doorway, then across to Stattor, and then behind him at the shimmering hub of the galaxy.

"Come in," he said, gesturing at one of the chairs. "Please."

Tentatively, she moved into the room, placing her feet on the transparent floor, as though she might disturb the universe with her passage. She sat down very slowly, her black prison garb pulling tight at her bony joints. She allowed her gaze to meet his.

Stattor smiled. "It's been a long time," he said. "How many years?"

"Twenty, I guess," she said unsurely. Her voice was gravelly and low and the right side of her mouth drooped when she spoke. She folded her knobby hands on her lap. "A long time."

Stattor lowered his mass into his chair. The pain in his ankles was replaced by a tight compressed feeling in his spine. "A long time," he repeated. "Twenty years, exactly, as of today."

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"I didn't know that," she said. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"Life is mysterious, isn't it? I've been feeling the need to tie up some loose ends," he said. He paused and nodded his head backward at the stars. "Up here, apart from any world, it's easy to forget one's past. By the way, do you remember Aros Blodian? I was thinking of him today."

Her old face looked vaguely surprised. "Of course I remember him. Where is he? Is he here?"

"I was thinking of a time when the three of us were at a lake, it was evening, and you were coming up from the shore. You were laughing. It's kind of a mental snapshot."

She looked at him blankly. "I can't remember."

Stattor shifted in his chair. His stomach burned a little on one side. His hands ached again too. "You probably wonder why I sent you to prison. You hadn't done anything disloyal to United Tarassis."

She nodded. "I wondered," she said slowly, the one side of her mouth dead and unmoving, "but I always understood."

"You understood?"

"Sometimes things have to be done that seem unfair. The individual sometimes has to sacrifice himself in that way, for the benefit of others."

"You never grew bitter? You never cursed me for your years in prison?"

She glanced at the floor, seemed uncomfortable, and moved in her chair with a tired nervousness. "It's because of you that our race has advanced to its position. You led us in the exploration of alien cultures. If my imprisonment helped humankind—and it did, or you wouldn't have put me there—then I have lived my life just as I always wanted."

With one finger, Stattor wiped the sweat out of the fold of skin beside his mouth. "I had forgotten how devoted you were. Tell me what life in prison was like."

"In camp, we got news every week," she said, "so I know what you've accomplished in all these years." She cleared her throat and ran the back of one hand across her temple, as though she were pushing back her short bristly hair. "I was in a support camp on Perda, 37th Sector. It's a cold place." She held out her left hand for him to see the missing fingertips. "We had aliens working in the chromium mines nearby. In my camp, we sewed shirts and pants for them, and in the last six years, we made shoes once every two months. Since we got heaters in a year ago, I could cut out ninety-six pairs of soles a day." She reversed her folded hands. "I have friends there. . . . I haven't been lonely. But it is cold. The ground is frozen most of the year." Her face brightened momentarily. "There're birds there." She shook her head as though chastising herself. "They were insects, but they were so big we thought of them as birds. Two weeks a year, in the warm season, they migrate south, and they sing." She looked weakened, haggard and old, but she

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did not look unhappy. "In ways I don't understand, my imprisonment served the higher destiny of mankind. I'm not bitter."

"You suffered," Stattor said.

"Everyone suffers."

"Have I suffered?" Stattor said, spreading his arms at the stars.

"You guided us." Her voice was firm. "Without you, we would still be in our provincial human backwater, weak and struggling for any step of progress."

Stattor leaned forward on his desk. He was smiling. The desk creaked under his weight. "You no longer have to suffer, Usko. I've set up a physical rehabilitation program for you, and when you've recovered, you'll be given living quarters on the world of your choosing, transportation privileges wherever you want to go, and an allotment of 500,000 credits a year."

She stared at him, and it seemed that for a full half minute she did not register what he had said.

"How much did they pay you on Perda?" he asked.

She swallowed heavily, her chin dipping as she did so. "They put 200 a year into an account for each of us."

"And how much have you earned so far?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I can't figure like that anymore."

"You may not know," Stattor said, "there's a severance tax of 28 percent. A prisoner who completes his sentence is required to pay for the food he has eaten." He smiled. "The severance tax was my idea."

"If it hadn't been necessary for our cause, you wouldn't have done it."

Stattor shook his head. This was the Usko Imani of his memories. When he had doubts, he had only to speak to her; her vision was intensely single-minded, sincere, and idealistic. She was unique. In part, that was why he had sent her to Perda.

"Would you like a drink?" Stattor asked suddenly.

"I haven't had a drink in—"

He pressed the call button and said to Zallon, "Bring Ms. Imani a gin and lemon." Stattor turned back to Usko and said, "That was your favorite drink. I remember. Perhaps you'll still have a taste for it." He leaned back in his chair. "No one was ever more dedicated to our cause than you. I admired you. I envied you for that. I remember a justice named Kudensa, a skinny, reactionary low-grade. . . . Do you remember him?"

She shook her head.

"You volunteered to bed him, to get information, although we all knew what he would put you through."

Still, she was shaking her head.

"I remember it took eight weeks for you to recover."

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She looked blank. "Did I get the information?"

Stattor nodded. "You did." He thought he saw her face start to relax.

Zallon entered with a tray, from which he took the cloudy yellow drink and placed it in Usko's hands with a linen napkin. Without a sound, the aide left the office.

"It was very loyal of you to do that," Stattor said.

"I don't remember it. It couldn't have hurt me badly. The good of humankind is important. I've served that."

"You're the only person who could say that that I would believe. That's why I put you in prison."

She had her drink halfway to her lips—her gnarled hands stopped there.

"Because of your idealism," Stattor explained. "That's why you spent twenty years in prison."

"I don't understand."

Stattor shrugged and sipped his drink. "Let's talk about the old days for a minute. Do you remember the Setback? When we lost nearly all of our secret council?"

Her face went suddenly grim. "I remember. On Perda, every year, we have half a day off to remember and study the works of those we lost. And to read the story of Kenda Dean, the informer."

"You knew Kenda well, didn't you?"

"I never suspected he could do such a thing—or that the government had been paying him the whole time. I accept it now, but I never understood it."

"You never understood it because he didn't do it. *I* did it. *I* informed."

She looked at him as though he were still speaking. Then, suddenly, she laughed, and he remembered how, long ago, she had laughed. He remembered her lips as she had come up from the lakeside. He remembered her hands and he remembered the morning they had awakened in each other's arms.

"It's true," he said. "I informed on them all."

"You didn't. You couldn't have."

"The government police had been paying me for almost a year prior to that. I used the police to eliminate opposition to my chairmanship of the movement."

"You couldn't—"

"I did it for myself. I have always done everything for myself."

"This is some kind of test," she said. "You're testing me in some clever way. You could never do such a thing. You've led the human race to dominance in the galaxy. You've devoted your life to—"

"To the acquisition of power," he said. "I did it for myself."

"I won't believe this."

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"Believe it. I did it because I wanted everything, and everything is mine now." He grinned. "Everything. You're mine."

"That isn't true. It's a lie, a test."

"It isn't wise, Usko, to tell Supervisor Stattor that he is lying. Normally, those who accuse me of lying are thrown into the core of the station." He smiled a bit more fiercely. "Then we can turn our thermostats up a few degrees."

"You couldn't have done that."

"If you don't tell me that you believe me, Usko, you'll be back cutting out your ninety-six pieces of shoe leather before the day is over. You'll do it till you die." He paused. "By the way, do you know where your 'leather' comes from?"

"Animals," she said tentatively.

"If you think your supervisor is incapable of betrayal and cruelty, I'll tell you where your shoe leather comes from." He waited for her response, but she said nothing. He leaned forward and the desk creaked under his weight. "Do you believe me?"

"Whatever you did, you did for the advancement of knowledge and for the security of the human race."

"I did it because I don't like competition, either from humans or trash-life. I had your friends butchered because they were in my way."

"You can't make me believe this," she said firmly. She sat up straighter and reached forward to put her drink on the edge of his desk. "We all sacrificed for our people, not for ourselves. I knew you well."

"You never knew me," he said. He leaned back and laced his fingers over his rolled stomach. For a moment, he seemed to be chewing something. "You're overburdened with misinformation. Let me clarify your situation. You have a choice. You can tell me that you believe me—that I informed on your friends and as a result they were sliced. Then you can walk out of here, have a warm place to live, and 500,000 credits a year. Or you can believe that this is a test, that Supervisor Stattor is lying to you, and *that*, Usko, is treason. For treason, you will spend the rest of your life dying on Perda, cutting shoe soles out of 'leather'."

Whatever small thing Stattor had sucked out of his teeth, he swallowed.

"Well?" he asked.

Her age, her fear, and her dread pushed her deeper into her chair. She had lowered her head and Stattor could see the dry frizzy hair that grew there in erratic patches.

She looked up. Above the mouth that was twisted by paralysis, her eyes sparkled as though they were filled with chips of silver. "You brought me here to offer me comfort and disgrace or a slow death for a wasted life. Why?"

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"I'm an insecure man. I sleep better when I know that others operate from self-interest. Your idealism makes me . . . uneasy." Stattor smiled. "When you accept my offer of generosity, you'll be as corrupt as the rest of us. There's no reason for you to go back to prison now, because the ideal you sacrificed for was an illusion."

"You're taking the one thing . . ."

Stattor smiled even harder. "And we used to think human nature was so damned mysterious." He pressed the call button on the autovox and Zallon entered immediately. "See that Ms. Imani has priority transportation to the rehabilitation center. Her welfare is of special importance to me."

"I understand."

"That's gratifying," Stattor said.

As Zallon helped her out of her chair, she said, "If I were strong enough to use these hands—"

"We mustn't let our lives be spoiled with regrets," Stattor said pleasantly.

As Zallon helped Usko through the door, she looked back once, it was just a glimpse, and Stattor was reminded of the other reason he had sent her to prison. It happened so many years ago, when they had awakened in each other's arms. She had slept so beautifully, her smooth, translucent eyelids closed over her quiet eyes—and then she had awakened and her eyes had opened suddenly and she had looked at him. There, wrapped in the sheets, with the morning sun streaming across the room, she had looked at him with that same expression—a kind of horrified surprise.

The door irised shut behind them, and Stattor nodded to himself. Yes, it was probably at that moment, with the sun filling the room—and he remembered there was a bowl of oranges on a table, radiant with sunlight—it was at that moment that he decided that some way, somehow, he would do this to her, and not long after that he began giving information to the government police.

So now it had all worked out. The loose end was tied to everything else.

He swept his hand across the lower part of his stomach. He did not feel so bad now. Neither his arms nor his legs ached, and his stomach did not seem filled with bile.

Stattor turned in his chair and gazed out the transparent bubble at the churning hub of the galaxy and then at his globular cluster. But beyond those stars, in the textureless black, there was what drew his eyes. When he looked into it, he almost felt his soul drawn out of his bloated and diseased body and sent into a place where there was neither light nor matter nor decay nor care.

The autovox chirped.

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"Supervisor," Zallon's voice said gently, "there is the matter of the dispersal list."

Stattor grunted and spun his chair to face the desk again. The list lay there, face up, awaiting his final decision whether or not to exempt any of the condemned. He thought of Aros waiting in some detention cell, old, haggard, half dead, and then he thought of himself and Usko, there beside the lake, so long ago. She had brought a bouquet of colored weeds up from the shoreline, and Aros had stood up, laughing, his arms wide to receive her—

His eyes stopped on the autovox.

Zallon had overstepped his limits. Stattor could barely see the green blossom of his nebula behind it. His emotionless aide, that sunken-eyed reptile, never revealed his feelings about anything, so how could he be trusted? He was an unknown.

Exempting no one from execution, Stattor pushed the list away from him. He had never liked Aros. Nor Zallon. With his fatted hand, Stattor retrieved the list and entered Zallon's name at the bottom. One way or another, so many people tried to stand in his way, to annoy him, or to prevent the grand and mysterious thing that was about to happen to him. It was very close. He could feel it come nearer every hour.

For a moment, his stomach did not burn and the beta-blocker made his life easier. He leaned back in his chair and again turned to face the absorbing blackness beyond the galaxy, and he was content to know that soon, so very soon, his flesh would turn to myth.

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 73)

SECOND SOLUTIONS TO INNER PLANETS QUIZ

5. Mercury has a weak magnetic field. It's not as strong as the earth's, but it is stronger than the magnetic fields of Venus and Mars. No one knows why Mercury has such a field, but then no one really knows for sure why the earth has one.

6. The word is "nevus." It's from the French and means a birthmark.

7. The earth and moon actually revolve around a common center. Because the earth is so much more massive than the moon, the center is inside the earth. As this "two-body" system rotates, centrifugal force produces high tides on the side of the earth opposite the moon.

8. The lady could be a native of Mars, Pennsylvania. There is a Mercury and Earth in Texas, and towns called Venus are in Texas, Florida, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania.

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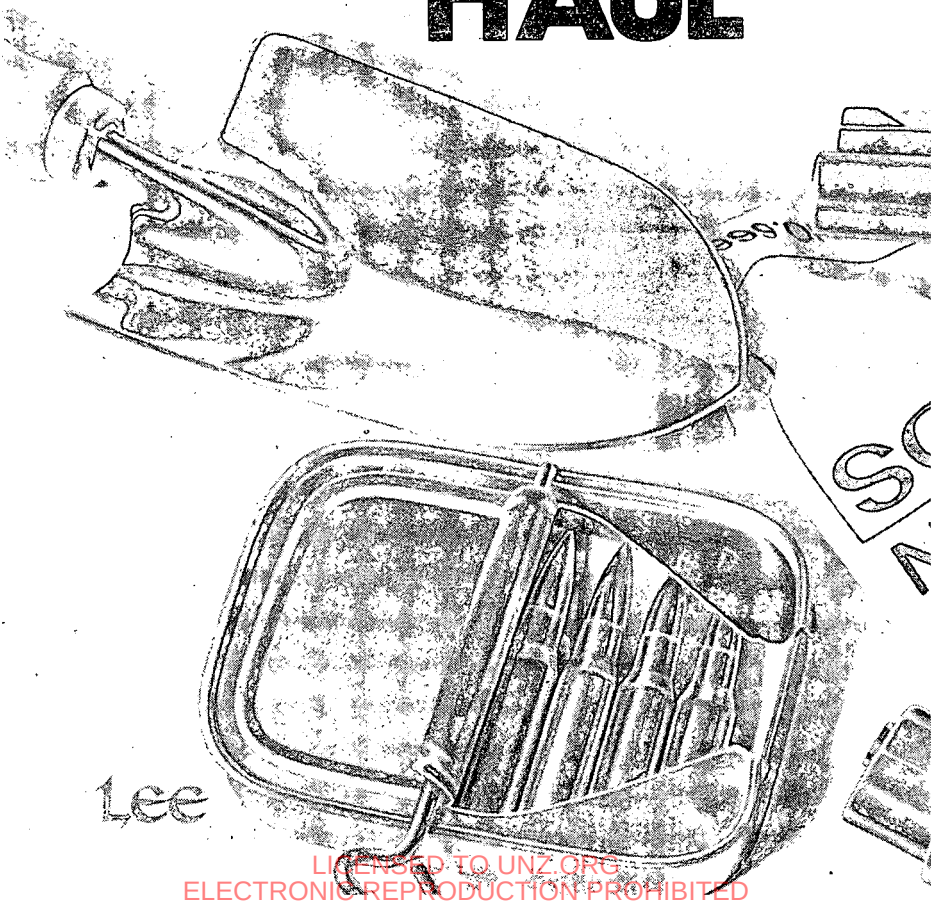
by T. Coraghessan Boyle

ON FOR THE LONG HAUL

art: Terry Lee



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T. Coraghessan Boyle is the author of a short story collection, *Descent of Man*, and a novel, *Water Music*. Another collection, *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*, has just been published by Viking. This is his first appearance in *IAsfm*, but we hope to be seeing more of him.

For forty years, post-nuclear holocaust has been a standard setting for science fiction stories. Here we have a powerful story, originally published in *Esquire*, that deals with the situation from the standpoint of the present. Yet the focus of thought is on the future, and thus I consider it SF.

—Isaac Asimov

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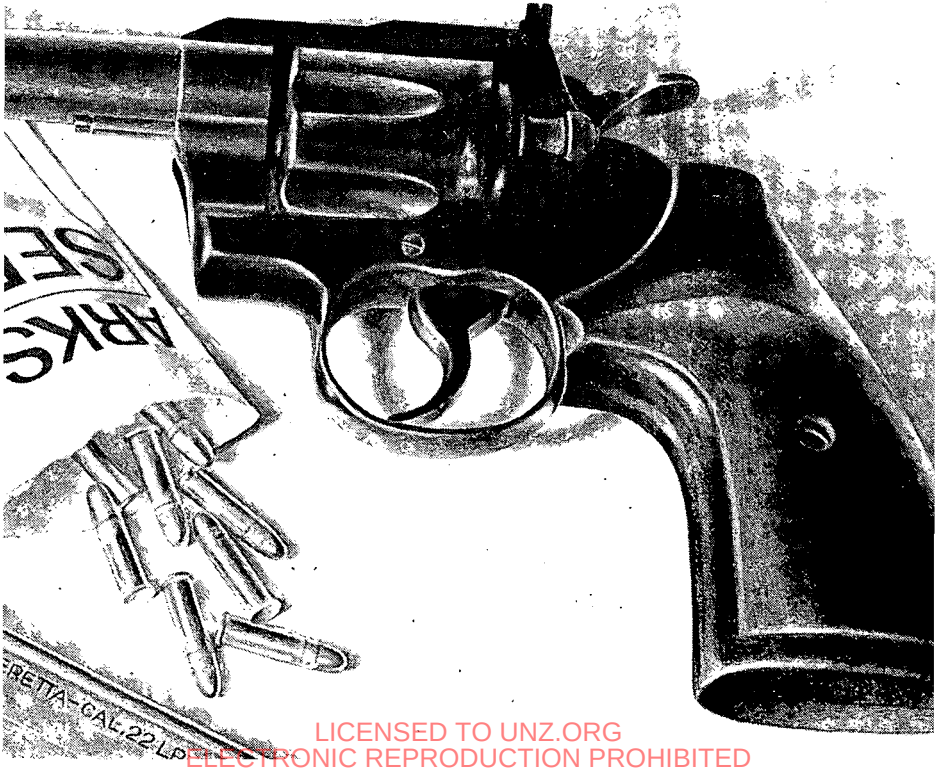

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There was nothing wrong with his appendix—no stitch in the side, no inflammation, no pain—but Bayard was having it out. For safety's sake. He'd read an article once about an anthropologist who'd gone to Malaysia to study the social habits of the orangutan and died horribly when her appendix had burst three hundred miles from the nearest hospital; as she lay writhing in her death agony the distraught apes had hauled her halfway up a jackfruit tree, where she was found several days later by a photographer from *Life* magazine. The picture—splayed limbs, gouty face, leaves like a mouthful of teeth—was indelible with him, a shoulder harness to his permanent mental baggage. She'd been unprepared, that anthropologist, inattentive to the little details that can make or break you. Bayard was taking no such chances.

At their first meeting, the surgeon had been skeptical. "You're going to Montana, Mr. Wenk, not Borneo. There are hospitals there, all the modern facilities."

"It's got to go, Doctor," Bayard had quietly insisted, looking up with perfect composure from the knot of his folded hands.

"Listen, Mr. Wenk. I've got to tell you that every surgical procedure, however routine, involves risk"—the doctor paused to let this sink in—"and I really feel the risks outweigh the gains in this case. All the tests are negative—we have no indication of a potential problem here."

"But, Doctor—" Bayard felt himself at a loss for words. How to explain to this earnest, assured man with the suntanned wife, the Mercedes, and the house in Malibu that all of Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York—civilization itself—was on the brink of a catastrophe that would make the Dark Ages look like a Sunday afternoon softball game? How intimate the horrors that lay ahead, the privation, the suffering? He remembered Aesop's fable about the ant and the grasshopper. Some would be prepared, others would not. "You just don't understand how isolated I'm going to be," he said finally.

Isolated, yes. Thirty-five acres in Bounceback, Montana, population thirty-seven. The closest town with a hospital, bank, or restaurant was Missoula, a two-and-a-half-hour drive, an hour of it on washboard dirt. Bayard would have his own well, a cleared acre for vegetable farming, and a four-room cabin with wood stove, electrical generator, and a radiation-proof cellar stocked with a five-year supply of canned and freeze-dried foodstuffs. The whole thing was the brainchild of Sam Arkson, a real estate developer who specialized in subsistence plots, bomb shelters, and survival homes. Bayard's firm had done some PR work for one of Arkson's companies—Thrive Inc.—and as he looked into the literature of catastrophe, Bayard had found himself growing ever more uncertain about the direction of his own life. *Remember the gas crisis?* asked one of Arkson's pamphlets. *An inconvenience, right? The have-nots stepping*

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on the haves. But what about the food crisis around the corner? Have you thought about what you'll do when they close up the supermarkets with a sign that says SORRY, TEMPORARILY OUT OF FOOD?

Bayard would never forget the day he'd come across that pamphlet. His palms had begun to sweat as he read on, gauging the effect of nuclear war on the food and water supply, thinking of life without toilet paper, toothpaste, or condiments, summoning images of the imminent economic depression, the starving masses, the dark-skinned marauding hordes pouring across our borders from the south to take, take, take with their greedy desperate clutching hands. That night he'd gone home in a cold sweat, visions of apocalypse dancing in his head. Fran made him a drink, but he couldn't taste it. The girls showed him their schoolwork—the sweet ingenuous loops of their penmanship, the pale watercolors and gold stars—and he felt the tears start up in his eyes. They were doomed, he was doomed, the world sinking like a stone. After they'd gone to bed he slipped out to the kitchen and silently pulled back the refrigerator door. Inside he found a head of deliquescing lettuce, half a gallon of milk, mayonnaise, mustard, chutney, a jar of capers so ancient it might have been unearthed in a tomb, a pint of butter brickle ice cream, and a single Mexicali Belle TV dinner. The larder yielded two cans of pickled Chinese mushrooms, half a dozen packages of artificial rice pudding, and a lone box of Yodo Crunch cereal, three quarters empty. He felt sick. Talk about a prolonged siege; they didn't even have breakfast.

That night his dreams had tentacles. He woke feeling strangled. The coffee was poisonous, the newspaper rife with innuendo, each story, each detail cutting into him with the sharp edge of doom. A major quake was on the way, the hills were on fire, there was murder and mayhem in Hollywood, AIDS was spreading to the heterosexual population, Qaddafi had the bomb. Outside was the traffic. Three million cars, creeping, spitting, killing the atmosphere, inching toward gridlock. The faces of the drivers were impassive. Shift, lurch, advance, stop, shift, lurch. Didn't they know the whole world had gone hollow, rotten like a tooth? Didn't they know they were dead? He looked into their eyes and saw empty sockets, looked into their faces and saw the death's-head. At work it was no better. The secretaries greeted him as if money mattered, as if there was time to breathe, to go out to Chan Dara for lunch and get felt up in the Xerox room; his colleagues were as bland as cue balls, nattering on about baseball, stocks, VCRs, and food processors. He staggered down the hallway as if he'd been hit in the vitals, slamming into the sanctuary of his office like a hunted beast. And there, on his desk, like the bony pointed finger of the Grim Reaper himself, was Arkson's pamphlet.

By two-thirty that afternoon he was perched on a chair in Sam Arkson's San Diego office, talking hard-core survival with the impresario himself.

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Arkson sat behind a desk the size of a trampoline, looking alternately youthful and fissured with age—he could have been anywhere from thirty-five to sixty. Aggressively tanned and conscientiously muscled, his hair cut so close to the scalp it might have been painted on, he resembled nothing so much as a professional sweatmeister, Vic Tanny fighting the waistline bulge, Jack LaLanne with a mohawk. He was dressed in fatigues and wore a khaki tie. "So," he said, leaning back in his chair and sizing up Bayard with a shrewd, unforgiving gaze, "are you on for the long haul or do you just need a security blanket?"

Bayard was acutely conscious of his paunch, the whiteness of his skin, the hair that trailed down his neck in soft frivolous coils. He felt like a green recruit under the burning gaze of the drill instructor, like an awkward dancer trying out for the wrong role. He coughed into his fist. "The long haul."

Arkson seemed pleased. "Good," he said, a faint smile playing across his lips. "I thought at first you might be one of these halfway types that wants a bomb shelter under the patio or something." He gave Bayard a knowing glance. "They might last a month or two after the blast," he said, "but what then? And what if it's not war we're facing but worldwide economic collapse? Are they going to eat their radiation detectors?"

This was a joke. Bayard laughed nervously. Arkson cut him off with a contemptuous snort and a wave of his hand that consigned all the timid slipshod Halfway Harrys of the world to an early grave. "No," he said, "I can see you're the real thing, a 100 percenter, no finger in the dike for you." He paused. "You're a serious person, Bayard, am I right?"

Bayard nodded.

"And you've got a family you want to protect?"

Bayard nodded again.

"Okay," Arkson was on his feet, a packet of brochures in his hand, "we're going to want to talk hidden location with the space, seeds, fertilizer, and tools to grow food and the means to hunt it, and we're going to talk a five-year renewable stockpile of survival rations, medical supplies, and specie . . . and of course weaponry."

"Weaponry?"

Arkson had looked at him as if he'd just put a bag over his head. "Tell me," he said, folding his arms so that the biceps swelled beneath the balled fists, "when the bust comes and you're sitting on the only food supply in the county, you don't really think your neighbors are going to breeze over for tea and polite chitchat, do you?"

Though Bayard had never handled a gun in his life, he knew the answer: there was a sickness on the earth and he'd have to harden himself to deal with it.

Suddenly Arkson was pointing at the ceiling, as if appealing to a higher

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authority to back him up. "You know what I've got up there on the roof?" he said, looming over Bayard like an inquisitor. Bayard hadn't the faintest idea.

"A Brantly B2B."

Bayard gave him a blank look.

"A chopper. Whirlybird. You know: upskidownski. And guess who flies it?" Arkson spread the brochure out on the desk in front of him, tapping a forefinger against the glossy photograph of a helicopter floating in a clear blue sky beneath the rubric ESCAPE CRAFT. "That's right, friend: me. I fly it. Leave nothing to chance, that's my motto." Bayard thumbed through the brochure, saw minijets, hovercraft, Cessnas, seaplanes, and ultralights.

"I can be out of town in ten minutes. Half an hour later I'm in my compound—two hundred fenced acres, three security men, goats, cows, chickens, pigs, corn as high as your chin, wheat, barley, rye, artesian wells, underground gas and water tanks—and an arsenal that could blow away the PLO. Listen," he said, and his eyes were like a stalking cat's, "when the shit hits the fan they'll be eating each other out there."

Bayard had been impressed. He was also terrified, sick with the knowledge of his own impotence and vulnerability. The blade was poised. It could fall today, tonight, tomorrow. They had to get out. "Fran," he called as he hurried through the front door, arms laden with glossy brochures, dire broadsides, and assorted survival tomes from Arkson Publications Ltd. "Fran!"

Fran had always been high-strung—neurotic, actually—and the sort of pure unrefined paranoia that had suddenly infested Bayard was second nature to her. Still, she would take some persuading—he was talking about uprooting their entire life, after all—and it was up to Bayard to focus that paranoia and bring it to bear on the issue at hand. She came out of the sun-room in a tentlike swimsuit, a large, solid, plain-faced woman in her late thirties, trailing children. She gave him a questioning look while the girls, chanting "Daddy, Daddy," foamed around his legs. "We've got to talk," was all he could say.

Later, after the children had been put to bed, he began his campaign. "We're sitting on a powder keg," he said as he bent over the dishwasher, stacking plates. She looked up, blinking behind the big rectangular frames of her glasses like a frogman coming up for air. "Pardon?"

"L.A., the whole West Coast. It's the first place the Russians'll hit—if the quake doesn't drop us into the ocean first. Or the banks go under. You've read about the S and L's, right?"

She looked alarmed. But then she alarmed easily. Chronically overprotected as a child, cloistered in a parochial school run along the lines of a medieval nunnery, and then consigned to a Catholic girls' college

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that made the earlier school look liberal, she believed with all her heart in the venality of man and the perfidy and rottenness of the world. On the rare occasions when she left the house she clutched her purse like a fullback going through a gap in the line, saw all pedestrians—even white-haired grandmothers—as potential muggers, and dodged Asians, Latinos, Pakistanis, and Iranians as if they were the hordes of Genghis Khan. "What in God's name are you talking about?" she said.

"I'm talking about Montana."

"Montana?"

At this point Bayard had simply fetched his trove of doom literature and spread it across the table. "Read," he said, knowing full well the books and pamphlets could speak far more eloquently than he. In the morning he'd found her hunched over the table still, the ashtray full beside her, a copy of *Doom Newsletter* in her hand, *Panic in the Streets* and *How to Kill, Volumes I–IV* face down beside a steaming coffee mug. "But what about the girls?" she said. "What about school, ballet lessons, tennis, swimming?"

Melissa was nine, Marcia seven. The move to the hinterlands would be disruptive for them, maybe traumatic—Bayard didn't deny it—but then so would nuclear holocaust. "Ballet lessons?" he echoed. "What good do you think ballet lessons are going to be when maniacs are breaking down the door?" And then, more gently: "Look, Fran, it's going to be hard for all of us, but I just don't see how we can stay here now that our eyes have been opened—it's like sitting on the edge of a volcano or something."

She was weakening, he could feel it. When he got home from the office she was sunk into the sofa, her eyes darting across the page before her like frightened animals. Arkson had called. Four times. "Mrs. Wenk, Fran," he'd shouted over the wire as if the barbarians were at the gate, "you've got to listen to me. I have a place for you. Nobody'll find you. You'll live forever. Sell that deathtrap and get out now before it's too late!" Toward the end of the week she went through an entire day without changing out of her nightgown. Bayard pressed his advantage. He sent the girls to the babysitter and took the day off from work to ply her with pamphlets, rhetoric and incontrovertible truths, and statistics on everything from the rising crime rate to nuclear kill ratios. As dusk fell that evening, the last choked rays of sunlight irradiating the smog till it looked like mustard gas coming in over the trenches, she capitulated. In a voice weak with terror and exhaustion, she called him into the bedroom, where she lay still as a corpse. "All right," she croaked. "Let's get out."

After Fran, the surgeon was easy. For fifteen minutes Bayard had quietly persisted while the doctor demurred. Finally, throwing his trump

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card, the surgeon leaned forward and said, "You're aware your insurance won't cover this, Mr. Wenk?"

Bayard had smiled. "No problem," he said. "I'll pay cash."

Two months later he and Fran sported matching abdominal scars, wore new flannel shirts and down vests, talked knowledgeably of seed sets, fertilizer, and weed killer, and resided in the distant rugged reaches of the glorious Treasure State, some four hundred miles from ground zero of the nearest likely site of atomic devastation. The cabin was a good deal smaller than what they were used to, but then they were used to luxury condominiums, and the cabin sacrificed luxury—comfort, even—for utility. Its exterior was simulated log, designed to make the place look like a trapper's cabin to the average marauder, but the walls were reinforced with steel plates to a thickness that would withstand bazooka or antitank gun. In the basement, which featured four-foot-thick concrete walls and lead shielding, was the larder. Ranks of hermetically sealed canisters mounted the right-hand wall, each with a reassuring shelf life of ten years or more: bulk grains, wild rice, textured vegetable protein, yogurt powder, matzo meal, hardtack, lentils, bran, Metamucil. Lining the opposite wall, precisely stacked, labeled, and alphabetized, were the freeze-dried entrées, from abbacchio alla cacciatora and beef Bourguignon to shrimp creole, turkey tetrazzini, and ziti alla romana. Bayard took comfort in their very names, as a novice might take comfort in the names of the saints: Just-in-Case freeze-dried linguine with white clam sauce, tomato crystals from Lazarus Foods, canned truffles from Gourmets for Tomorrow, and Arkson's own Stash Brand generic foodstuffs, big plain-labeled cans that read CATSUP, SAUERKRAUT, DETERGENT, LARD. In the evenings, when the house was as quiet as the far side of the moon, Bayard would slip down into the shelter, pull the airtight door closed behind him and spend hours contemplating the breadth, variety, and nutritional range of his cache. Sinking back in a padded armchair, his heartbeat decelerating, breathing slowed to a whisper, he would feel the calm of the womb descend on him. Then he knew the pleasures of the miser, the hoarder, the burrowing squirrel, and he felt as free from care as if he were wafting to and fro in the dark amniotic sea whence he sprang.

Of course, such contentment doesn't come cheap. The whole package—land, cabin, four-wheel-drive vehicle, arms and munitions, foodstuffs, and silver bars, De Beers diamonds, and cowrie shells for barter—had cost nearly half a million. Arkson, whose corporate diversity put him in a league with Gulf & Western, had been able to provide everything, lock, stock, and barrel, right down to the church-key opener in the kitchen drawer and the reusable toilet paper in the bathroom.

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There were radiation suits, flannels, and thermal underwear from Arkson Outfitters and weapons—including a pair of Russian-made AK-47s smuggled out of Afghanistan and an Israeli grenade launcher—from Arkson Munitions. In the driveway, from Arkson Motors, Domestic and Import, was the four-wheel-drive, Norwegian-made Olfputt TC-17, which would run on anything handy, from paint thinner to rubbing alcohol, climb the north face of the Eiger in an ice storm, and pull a plow through frame-deep mud. The cabin's bookshelves were mostly given over to the How-to, Survival, and Self-help tomes in which Arkson Publications specialized, but there were reprints of selected classics—*A Journal of the Plague Year, Hiroshima,* and *Down and Out in Paris and London*—as well. Arkson made an itemized list, tallied the whole thing up, and presented the bill to Bayard and Fran in the San Diego office.

Fran was so wrought up at this point, she barely gave it a glance. She kept looking over her shoulder at the door, as if in expectation of the first frenzied pillagers, and then she would glance down at the open neck of her purse and the .22-caliber Beretta that Arkson had just handed her. ("My gift to you, Fran," he'd said. "Learn to use it.") Bayard was distracted himself. He tried to look judicious, tried to focus on the sheet of paper before him with the knowing look one puts on for garage mechanics presenting the bill for arcane mechanical procedures and labor at the rate of $120 an hour, but he couldn't. What did it matter? Until he was ensconced in his cabin he was like crab without a shell. "Seems fair," he muttered.

Arkson had come round the desk to perch on the near edge and take his hand. "No bargain rate for survival, Bayard," he said, "no fire sales. If the price seems steep, just think of it this way: Would you put a price on your life? Or the lives of your wife and children?" He'd paused to give Bayard a saintly look, the look of the young Redeemer stepping through the doors of the temple. "Just be thankful that you two had the financial resources—and the foresight—to protect yourselves."

Bayard had looked down at the big veiny tanned hand clutching his own and had shaken mechanically. He felt numb. The past few weeks had been hellish, what with packing up, supervising the movers, and making last-minute trips to the mall for things like thread, Band-Aids, and dental floss—not to mention agonizing over the sale of the house, anticipating Fran's starts and rushes of panic, and turning in his resignation at the Hooper-Munson Company, where he'd put in fourteen years and worked himself up to Senior Vice-president in Charge of Reversing Negative Corporate Image. Without Arkson it would have been impossible. He'd soothed Fran, driven the children to school, called the movers, cleaners, and painters, and then gone to work on Bayard's assets with the single-mindedness of a general marshaling troops. Arkson

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Realty had put the condo on the market and found a buyer for the summer place in Big Bear, and Arkson, Arkson, and Arkson, Brokers, had unloaded Bayard's holdings on the stock exchange with a barely significant loss. When combined with Fran's inheritance and the money Bayard had put away for the girls' education, the amount realized would meet Thrive Inc.'s price and then some. It was all for the best, Arkson kept telling him, all for the best. If Bayard had second thoughts about leaving his job and dropping out of society, he could put them out of his mind: society, as he'd known it, wouldn't last out the year. And as far as money was concerned, well, they'd be living cheaply from here on out.

"Fran," Arkson was saying, taking her hand now too and linking the three of them as if he were a revivalist leading them forward to the purifying waters, "Bayard . . ." he paused again, overcome with emotion: "Feel lucky."

Now, two months later, Bayard could stand on the front porch of his cabin, survey the solitary expanse of his property, with its budding aspen and cottonwood and glossy conifers, and take Arkson's parting benediction to heart. He did feel lucky. Oh, perhaps on reflection he could see that Arkson had shaved him on one item or another, and that the doom merchant had kindled a blaze under him and Fran that put them right in the palm of his hand, but Bayard had no regrets. He felt secure, truly secure, for the first time in his adult life, and he bent contentedly to ax or hoe, glad to have escaped the Gomorrah of the city. For her part, Fran seemed to have adjusted well, too. The physical environment beyond the walls of her domain had never much interested her, and so it was principally a matter of adjusting to one set of rooms as opposed to another. Most important though, she seemed more relaxed. In the morning she would lead the girls through their geography or arithmetic, then read, sew, or nap in the early afternoon. Later she would walk round the yard—something she rarely did in Los Angeles—or work in the flower garden she'd planted outside the front door. At night there was television, the signals called down to earth from the heavens by means of the satellite dish Arkson had providently included in the package.

The one problem was the girls. At first they'd been excited, the whole thing a lark, a vacation in the woods, but as the weeks wore on they became increasingly withdrawn, secretive, and, as Bayard suspected, depressed. Marcia missed Mrs. Sturdivant, her second-grade teacher; Melissa missed her best friend Nicole, Disneyland, Baskin-Robbins, and the beach, in that order. Bayard saw the pale sad ovals of their faces framed in the gloom of the back bedroom as they hovered over twice-used coloring books, and he felt as if a stake had been driven through his heart. "Don't worry," Fran said, "give them time. They'll make the

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adjustment." Bayard hoped so. Because there was no way they were going back to the city.

One afternoon—it was mid-June, already hot, a light breeze discovering dust and tossing it on the hoods and windshields of the cars parked along the street—Bayard was in the lot outside Chuck's Wagon in downtown Bounceback, loading groceries into the back of the Olfputt, when he glanced up to see two men stepping out of a white Mercedes with California plates. One of them was Arkson, in his business khakis and tie. The other—tall and red-faced, skinny as a refugee in faded green jumpsuit and work boots—Bayard had never seen before. Both men stretched themselves, and then the stranger put his hands on his hips and slowly revolved a full 360 degrees, his steady expressionless gaze taking in the gas station, saloon, feedstore, and half-deserted streets as if he'd come to seize them for nonpayment of taxes. Bayard could hardly contain himself. "Sam!" he called. "Sam Arkson!" And then he was in motion, taking the lot in six animated strides, his hands outstretched in greeting.

At first Arkson didn't seem to recognize him. He'd taken the stranger's arm and was pointing toward the mountains like a tour guide when Bayard called out his name. Half-turning, as if at some minor disturbance, Arkson gave him a preoccupied look, then swung back to say something under his breath to his companion. By then Bayard was on him, pumping his hand. "Good to see you, Sam."

Arkson shook numbly. "You too," he murmured, avoiding Bayard's eyes.

There was an awkward silence. Arkson looked constipated. The stranger—his face was so red he could have been apoplectic, terminally sunburned, drunk—glared at Bayard as if they'd just exchanged insults. Bayard's gaze shifted uneasily from the stranger's eyes to the soiled yellow beret that lay across his head like a cheese omelet and then back again to Arkson. "I just wanted to tell you how well we're doing, Sam," he stammered, "and, and to thank you—I mean it, really—for everything you've done for us."

Arkson brightened immediately. If a moment earlier he'd looked like a prisoner in the dock, hangdog and tentative, now he seemed his old self. He smiled, ducked his head, and held up his palm in humble acknowledgment. Then, running his fingers over the stubble of his crown, he stepped back a pace and introduced the ectomorphic stranger. "Rayfield Cullum," he said, "Bayard Wenk."

"Glad to meet you," Bayard said, extending his hand.

The stranger's hands never left his pockets. He stared at Bayard a moment out of his deep-set yellow eyes, then turned his head to spit in the dirt. Bayard's hand dropped like a stone.

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"I'd say you two have something in common," Arkson said mysteriously. And then, leaning forward and dropping his voice: "Rayfield and I are just ironing out the details on the plot next to yours. He wants in this week—tomorrow, if not sooner." Arkson laughed. The stranger's eyes lifted to engage Bayard's; his face remained expressionless.

Bayard was taken by surprise. "Plot?" he repeated.

"East and south," Arkson said, nodding. "You'll be neighbors. I've got a retired couple coming in the end of the month from Saratoga Springs—they'll be purchasing the same package as yours directly to the north of you, by that little lake?"

"Package?" Bayard was incredulous. "What is this, Levittown, Montana, or something?"

"Heh-heh, very funny, Bayard." Arkson had put on his serious look, life-and-death, the world's a jungle, LaLanne admonishing his audience over the perils of flab. "The crunch comes, Bayard," he said, "you could support fifty people on those thirty-five acres, what with the game in those woods and the fertility of that soil. You know it as well as I do."

Now Cullum spoke for the first time, his voice a high nagging rasp, like static. "Arkson," he said, driving nails into the first syllable, "I ain't got all day."

It was then that Melissa, giggling like a machine and with a pair of ice cream cones thrust up like torches over her head, came tearing around the side of the building, her sister in pursuit. Marcia was not giggling. She was crying in frustration, wailing as if her heart had been torn out, and cutting the air with a stick. "Melissa!" Bayard shouted, but it was too late. Her skinny brown legs got tangled and she pitched forward into Cullum, who was just then swiveling his head around at the commotion. There was the scrape of sneakers on gravel, the glare of the sun poised motionless overhead, and then the wet rich fecal smear of chocolate fudge ice cream—four scoops—on the seat of Cullum's jumpsuit. Cullum's knee buckled under the impact, and he jumped back as if bitten by a snake. "Goddammit!" he roared, and Bayard could see that his hands were shaking. "Goddammit to hell!"

Melissa lay sprawled in the dirt. Stricken face, a thin wash of red on her scraped knee. Bayard was already bending roughly for her, angry, an apology on his lips, when Cullum took a step forward and kicked her twice in the ribs. "Little shit," he hissed, his face twisted with lunatic fury, and then Arkson had his broad arms around him, pulling him back like a handler with an attack dog.

Melissa's mouth was working in shock, the first hurt breathless shriek caught in her throat, Marcia stood white-faced behind them, Cullum was spitting out curses and dancing in Arkson's arms. Bayard might have lifted his daughter from the dirt and pressed her to him, he might have

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protested, threatened, waved his fist at this rabid dog with the red face, but he didn't. No. Before he could think, he was on Cullum, catching him in the center of that flaming face with a fist like a knob of bone. Once, twice, zeroing in on the wicked little dog's eyes and the fleshy dollop of the nose, butter, margarine, wet clay, something giving with a crack, and then a glancing blow off the side of the head. He felt Cullum's work boots flailing for his groin as he stumbled forward under his own momentum, and then Arkson was driving him up against the Mercedes and shouting something in his face. Suddenly freed, Cullum came at him, beret askew, blood bright in his nostrils, but Arkson was there, pinning Bayard to the car and shooting out an arm to catch hold of the skinny man's shirt. "Daddy!" Melissa shrieked, the syllables broken with shock and hurt.

"You son of a bitch!" Bayard shouted.

"All right now, knock it off, will you?" Arkson held them at arm's length like a pair of fighting cocks. "It's just a misunderstanding, that's all."

Bleeding, shrunk into his jumpsuit like a withered tortoise, Cullum held Bayard's gaze and dropped his voice to a hiss. "I'll kill you," he said.

Fran was aghast. "Is he dangerous?" she said, turning to peer over her spectacles at Bayard and the girls as they sat at the kitchen table. She was pouring wine vinegar from a three-gallon jug into a bowl of cucumber spears. Awkwardly. "I mean, he sounds like he escaped from a mental ward or something."

Bayard shrugged. He could still taste the tinny aftershock the incident had left in the back of his throat. A fight. He'd been involved in a fight. Though he hadn't struck anyone in anger since elementary school, hadn't even come close, he'd reacted instinctively in defense of his children. He sipped his gimlet and felt a glow of satisfaction.

"This is the man we're going to have next door to us?" Fran set the bowl on the table beside a platter of reconstituted stir-fried vegetables and defrosted tofu. The girls were subdued, staring down their straws into glasses of chocolate milk. "Well?" Fran's eyes searched him as she sat down across the table. "Do you think I can have any peace of mind with this sort of . . . of violence and lawlessness on my doorstep? Is this what we left the city for?"

Bayard speared a square of tofu and fed it into his mouth. "It's hardly on our doorstep, Fran," he said, gesturing with his fork. "Besides, I can handle him, no problem."

A week passed. Then two. Bayard saw no more of Arkson, nor of Cullum, and the incident began to fade from his mind. Perhaps Cullum had soured on the deal and gone off somewhere else—or back to the hole

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he'd crawled out of. And what if he did move in? Arkson was right: there was so much land between them they might never lay eyes on each other, let alone compete for resources. At any rate, Bayard was too busy to worry about it. Mornings, it was second-grade geography and fourth-grade history, which meant relearning his state capitals and trying to keep his De Sotos, Coronados, and Cabeza de Vacas straight. Afternoons, he kept busy with various improvement projects—constructing a lopsided playhouse for the girls, fencing his vegetable garden against the mysterious agent that masticated everything he planted right down to the root, splitting and stacking wood, fumbling over the instructions for the prefab aluminum tool shed he'd mail-ordered from the Arkson Outfitters catalog. Every third day he drove into Bounceback for groceries (he and Fran had decided to go easy on the self-subsistence business until such time as society collapsed and made it imperative), and on weekends the family would make the long trek down to Missoula for a restaurant meal and a movie. It was on one of these occasions that they bought the rabbits.

Bayard was coming out of the hardware store with a box of two-penny nails, a set of socket wrenches, and a hacksaw when he spotted Fran and the girls across the street, huddled over a man who seemed to be part of the sidewalk. The man, Bayard saw as he crossed the street to join them, was long-haired, bearded, and dirty. He had a burlap sack beside him, and the sack was moving. "Here, here," said the man, grinning up at them, and then he plunged his hand into the bag and drew out a rabbit by the ears. The animal's paws were bound with rubber bands, its fur was rat-colored. "This one here's named Duke," the man said, grinning. "He's trained."

Long-whiskered, long-eared, and long-legged, it looked more like a newborn mule than a rabbit. As the man dangled it before the girls, its paws futilely kicking and eyes big with terror, Bayard almost expected it to bray. "Good eatin', friend," the man said, giving Bayard a shrewd look.

"Daddy," Melissa gasped, "can we buy him? Can we?"

The man was down on his knees, fumbling in the sack. A moment later he extracted a second rabbit, as lanky, brown, and sickly looking as the first. "This one's Lennie. He's trained, too."

"Can we, Daddy?" Marcia chimed in, tugging at his pant leg.

Bayard looked at Fran. The girls held their breath. "Five bucks," the man said.

Down the street sat the Olfputt, gleaming like a gigantic toaster oven. Two women, a man in a cowboy hat, and a boy Melissa's age stood staring at it in awe and bewilderment. Bayard jingled the change in his pocket, hesitating. "For both," the man said.

Initially, the rabbits seemed a good idea. Bayard was no psychologist,

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but he could see that these gangling, flat-footed rodents, with their multiplicity of needs, with their twitching noses and grateful mouths, might help draw the girls out of themselves. He was right. From the moment they'd hustled the rabbits into the car, cut their bonds, and pressed them to their scrawny chests, while Fran fretted over ticks, tularemia, and relapsing fever, the girls were absorbed with them. They fed them grass, lettuce, and the neat little pellets of rabbit food that so much resembled the neat little pellets that the animals excreted. They cuddled, dressed, and brushed them. They helped Bayard construct a pair of interlocking chicken wire cages and selected the tree from which they would hang, the girls' thin, serious faces compressed with concern over weasels, foxes, coons, coyotes. Melissa devoted less time to tormenting her sister and bemoaning the absence of her school friends; Marcia seemed less withdrawn.

For his part, Bayard too found the new pets compelling. They thumped their feet joyously when he approached their cages with lettuce or parsley, and as they nuzzled his fingers he gazed out over his cleared acre to the trees beyond and thought how this was only the beginning. He would have goats, chickens, pigs, maybe even a cow or horse. The way he saw it, a pet today was meat on the hoof tomorrow. Hadn't they eaten horses during the First World War? Mules, oxen, dogs? Not to mention rabbits. Of course, these particular rabbits were an exception. Though in theory they were to be skinned, stewed, and eaten in time of distress, though they represented a hedge against hard times and a life-sustaining stock of protein, Bayard looked into their quiet moist eyes and knew he would eat lentils first.

The following week Bayard took the family into Missoula for a double sci-fi/horror feature (which only helped confirm him in his conviction that the world was disintegrating) and dinner at the local Chinese restaurant. It was after dark when they got home and the Olfputt's headlights swung into the yard to illuminate two tiny figures hanging like wash from the simulated beam that ran the length of the front porch. Melissa spotted them first. "What's that?" she said.

"Where?"

"There, up on the porch."

By the time Bayard saw them it was too late. Fran had seen them too—disheveled ears and limp paws, the puny little carcasses twisting slowly round their monofilament nooses—and, worse, the seven-year-old, rousing from her sleep, had caught a nightmarish glimpse of them before he could flick off the lights. "My God," Fran whispered. They sat there a moment, the dark suffocating, no gleam of light for miles. Then Marcia began to whimper and Melissa called out his name sharply, as if in

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accusation, as if he alone were responsible for all the hurts and perversions of the world.

Bayard felt he was sinking. Pork fried rice and duck sauce tore at the pit of his stomach with a hellish insistence, Fran was hyperventilating, and the girls' lamentations rose in intensity from piteous bewildered bleats to the caterwauling of demons. Frightened, angry, uncomprehending, he sat there in utter blackness, his hands trembling on the wheel. When finally he flicked on the parking lights and pushed open the door, Fran clutched his arm with the grip of a madwoman. "Don't go out there," she hissed.

"Don't be silly," Bayard said.

"No," she sobbed, clawing at him as if she were drowning. Her eyes raged at him in the dim light, the girls were weeping and moaning, and then she was pressing something into his hand, heavy, cold, instrument of death. "Take this."

Six or seven pickups were parked outside the T&T Cocktail Bar when Bayard rolled in to downtown Bounceback. It was half past eleven, still hot, the town's solitary streetlight glowing like a myopic eye. As he crossed the street to the telephone outside Chuck's Wagon, Bayard could make out a number of shadowy figures in broad-brimmed hats milling around in front of the bar. There was a murmur of disembodied voices, the nagging whine of a country fiddle, stars overhead, the glow of cigarettes below. Drunks, he thought, hurrying past them. Their lives wouldn't be worth a carton of crushed eggs when the ax fell.

Bayard stalked up to the phone, tore the receiver from its cradle, and savagely dialed a number he'd scribbled across a paper napkin. He was angry, keyed up, hot with outrage. He listened to the phone ring once, twice, three times, as he cursed under his breath. This was too much. His wife was sick with fear, his children traumatized, and all he'd worked for—security, self-sufficiency, peace of mind—was threatened. He'd had to prowl round his own home like a criminal, clutching a gun he didn't know how to use, jumping at his own shadow. Each bush was an assassin, each pocket of shadow a crouching adversary, the very trees turned against him. Finally, while Fran and the girls huddled in the locked car, he'd cut down Lennie and Duke, bundled the lifeless bodies in a towel, and hid them out back. Then Fran, her face like a sack of flour, had made him turn on all the lights till the house blazed like a stage set, insisting that he search the closets, poke the muzzle of the gun under the beds, and throw back the doors of the kitchen cabinets like an undercover cop busting drug peddlers. When he'd balked at this last precaution—the cabinets couldn't have concealed anything bigger than a basset hound—she'd reminded him of how they found Charlie Manson

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under the kitchen sink. "All right," he'd said after searching the basement, "there's nobody here. It's okay."

"It was that maniac, wasn't it?" Fran whispered, as if afraid she'd be overheard.

"Daddy," Melissa cried, "where's Lennie . . . and . . . and Duke?" The last word trailed off in a broken lamentation for the dead, and Bayard felt the anger like a hot nugget inside him.

"I don't know," he said, pressing Melissa to him and massaging her thin quaking little shoulders. "I don't know." Through the doorway he could see Marcia sitting in the big armchair, sucking her thumb. Suddenly he became aware of the gun in his hand. He stared down at it for a long moment, and then almost unconsciously, as if it were a cigarette lighter or nail clipper, he slipped it into his pocket.

Now he stood outside Chuck's Wagon, the night breathing down his neck, the telephone receiver pressed to his ear. Four rings, five, six. Suddenly the line engaged and Arkson, his voice shrunk round a kernel of suspicion, answered with a quick tentative "Yeah?"

"Sam? It's me, Bayard."

"Who?"

"Bayard Wenk."

There was a pause. "Oh yeah," Arkson said finally, "Bayard. What can I do for you? You need anything?"

"No, I just wanted to ask you—"

"Because I know you're going to be short of hardware for harvesting, canning, and all that, and I've got a new line of meat smokers you might want to take a look at—"

"Sam!" Bayard's voice had gone shrill, and he fought to control it. "I just wanted to ask you about the guy in the beret, you know, the one you had with you up here last month—Cullum?"

There was another pause. Bayard could picture his mentor in a flame-retardant bathrobe, getting ready to turn in on a bed that converted to a life raft in the event a second flood came over the earth while he lay sleeping. "Uh-huh. Yeah. What about him?"

"Well, did he ever buy the place? I mean, is he up here now?"

"Listen, Bayard, why not let bygones be bygones, huh? Rayfield is no different than you are—except maybe he doesn't like children, is all. He's a 100 percenter, Bayard, on for the long haul like you. I'm sure he's forgot all about that little incident—and so should you."

Bayard drew a long breath. "I've got to know, Sam."

"It takes all kinds, Bayard."

"I don't need advice, Sam. Just information. Look, I can go down to the county assessor's office in the morning and get what I want."

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Arkson sighed. "All right," he said finally. "Yes. He moved in yesterday."

When he turned away from the phone, Bayard felt his face go hot. Survival. It was a joke. He owned thirty-five acres of untrammeled wild-west backwoods wilderness land, and his only neighbor was a psychopath who kicked children in the stomach and mutilated helpless animals. Well, he wasn't going to allow it. Society might be heading for collapse, but there were still laws on the books. He'd call the sheriff, take Cullum to court, have him locked up.

He was halfway to his car, just drawing even with the open door of the T&T, when he became aware of a familiar sound off to his left—he turned, recognizing the distinctive high whine of an Olfputt engine. There, sitting at the curb, was an Olfputt pickup, looking like half an MX missile with a raised bed grafted to the rear end. He stopped, puzzled. This was no Ford, no Chevy, no Dodge. The Olfputt was as rare in these parts as a palanquin—he'd never seen one himself till Arkson. . . . Suddenly he began to understand.

The door swung open. Cullum's face was dark—purple as a birth stain in the faint light. The engine ticked, raced, and then fell back as the car idled. The headlights seemed to clutch at the street. "Hey, hey," Cullum said. "Mr. Rocky Marciano. Mr. Streetfight."

Bayard became aware of movement in the shadows around him. The barflies, the cowboys, had gathered silently, watching him. Cullum stood twenty feet away, a rifle dangling at his side. Bayard knew that rifle, just as he'd known the Olfputt. Russian-made, he thought. AK-47. Smuggled out of Afghanistan. He felt Fran's little pistol against his thigh, weighing him down like a pocketful of change. His teeth were good, his heartbeat strong. He had a five-year supply of food in his basement and a gun in his pocket. Cullum was waiting.

Bayard took a step forward. Cullum spat in the dirt and raised the rifle. There was a muffled cough from the shadows, and out of the corner of his eye Bayard saw the flare of a match, the implacable dark figures of the spectators, and then the faces of Fran and the children passing in quick review.

He could have gone for his gun, but he didn't even know how to release the safety catch, let alone aim and fire the thing, and it came to him that even if he did know how to handle it, even if he'd fired it a thousand times at cans, bottles, rocks, and junkyard rats, he would never use it, not if all of the hungry hordes of the earth were at his door.

But Cullum would. Oh yes, Cullum would. Cullum was on for the long haul. ●

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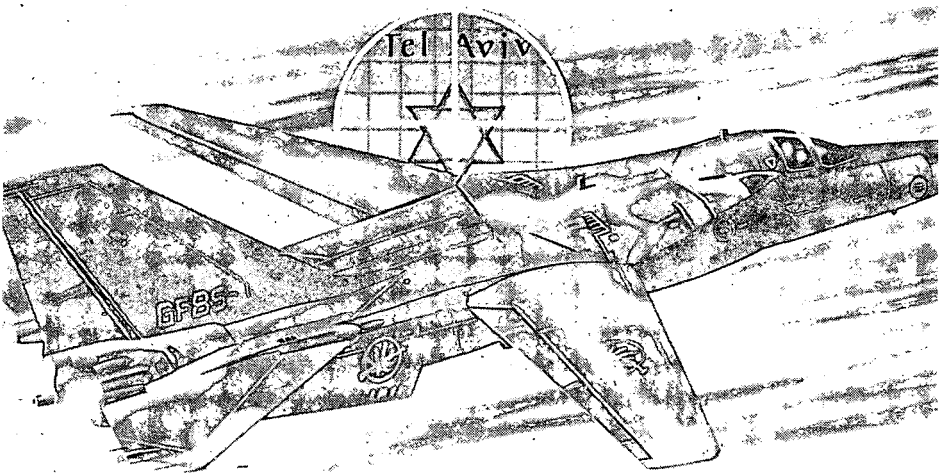
art: Gary Freeman

by Norman Spinrad

As you read this story, Norman Spinrad's latest novel, *Child of Fortune*, is about to appear from Bantam Spectra Books. He says, though, that the two are about as different as day and night, in more ways than one. . . .



WORLD WAR LAST

A word of warning: If this story were a movie, it would probably be rated "R."

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Six weeks before election day, Elmer Powell, the famous pollster, got a phone call from an anonymous someone at the Korami embassy who made him an offer he could hardly understand, let alone refuse.

Hassan al Korami wished a private consultation, for which he would pay the equivalent of one million dollars in a currency of Powell's own choosing.

There was only one catch: Hassan wanted to talk to him *right now*, meaning that Powell had to fly to Koramibad within the next four hours, take it or leave it.

Powell took it. Three hours later, a limo from the Korami embassy picked him up at his downtown Washington office, an hour and a half after that, it had managed to fight its way through the traffic to Dulles International Airport, and fifteen minutes later he was aboard a Korami Airlines Concorde on his way to the tiny Arabian sheikdom.

He seemed to be the only passenger aboard, though it was hard to be sure, since the plane's interior was done up as a series of little private tents. He was served an excellent five-course French meal but no wine or other alcohol was available, though the hookah alongside his luxurious couch was provided with a chunk of hashish the size of a baseball.

After dinner, instead of a movie, a stunning and scantily clad young woman appeared, announced that she was his houri for the flight, and proceeded to transport him to an impressively realistic Earthly version of Moslem paradise for as long as his body could take it.

So by the time the plane began its descent over the sere desert wastes towards Koramibad International Airport, Powell was stuffed to the gills, fried to the eyeballs, and screwed silly. He had read the stories on Hassan which appeared now and again in *People, High Times*, and the *National Enquirer*, but now he was beginning to believe them.

The Sheikdom of Koram was a desert principality about the size of Los Angeles County floating like a cork atop an immense pool of oil. The mild earthquakes which rocked the sheikdom from time to time were not, as the bedouins wandering the dunes in their Land Rovers and mobile homes believed, manifestations of the so-called Sacred Rage of Hassan al Korami, but manifestations of the fact that the entire state of Koram was slowly subsiding as the forest of wells which covered it sucked up the oil table below it into Swiss bank accounts.

Hassan the Assassin, Sheik of Koram, practiced and enforced his own stoned-out brand of Islam, which indeed made the Iranian ayatollahs and Shiite mujadin seem like the effete liberals he often enough called them.

No alcohol. No movies. No TV. No newspapers. No jails. Even minor transgressions were punished by public beheading, unless Hassan was

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feeling particularly mellow that day, in which case a traffic offender might get off with a mutilation and a stiff warning.

Hashish, however, was legal to the point of being mandatory. Hassan al Korami, as the third son down and not figured to ever inherit the throne, had spent his early manhood playing a hippie Ali Khan in the more disreputable flesh and dope pots of the decadent West, until one day while supposedly reading William Burroughs on acid, he experienced the mystic revelation which made him a Born Again Moslem.

He suddenly began appearing on sleazy cable TV talk shows declaring himself to be the reincarnation of Hassan i Sabah, the legendary Master of the Hashishins. Soon thereafter, his elder brothers expired under rather suspicious circumstances, after which his father was conveniently trampled to death by a herd of camels.

Upon assuming the throne, Hassan began preaching a stoned-out form of Islam in which he was the Pope and hashish was the sacrament. All his government functionaries and troops were required to be stoned during duty hours in order to maintain the purity of their fanaticism. Random urine checks were done from time to time, and any soldier or official whose piss was found wanting in the residues of tetrahydrocanabinol was given a choice between castration and execution.

He also nominated himself all Islam's destined leader in a Jihad he declared against Israel and periodically proclaimed his intent to drive the Jews into the sea. Since the entire adult male population of Koram was less than 50,000, no one took this bellicosity very seriously, except, of course, for the international arms merchants, who supposedly took north of three billion dollars a year out of the bottomless Korami treasury.

Powell, like most Westerners, discounted much of this as hyperbole, but upon debarking from the Concorde onto the broiling tarmac, stoned as he was, he still had to admit that seeing was believing.

A soaring Bauhaus terminal highlighted with incongruous minarets and a great golden dome was the centerpiece of Koramibad International Airport. Surrounding this monstrosity and seeming to occupy every square foot of the huge airport save the main runway was a veritable junkyard of jet fighters of all nations, bleaching and rusting in the cruel desert sun.

American F-16s, F-15s, F-21s. Russian Mig 21s and 27s. French Mirage 3000s and Super Entendards. Swedish Saabs. British Super Harriers. Good lord, there were even Israeli Kfirs, as if Hassan just *had* to complete his collection.

It must have been the third largest air force in the world after the Russian and American, and surely the Israelis would be in deep shit indeed if Hassan ever found enough pilots to put half of it in the air

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before it rusted away to rubble. But fortunately, mercenaries avoided Koram like the clap despite the high wages, since they were required to live under the Draconian laws of the self-styled Scourge of the Infidel and fly stoned as well, and the few Korami natives who tried their hands from time to time bought the farm after a month or two.

An air-conditioned Rolls waited at the foot of the ramp, presided over by two of al Korami's Hashishins, replete with kafiyahs, Kalashnikovs, and enormous spliffs, and Powell was ushered into the back seat, handed another of the gigantic joints, and treated to a wild ride to the palace.

Koramibad, such as it was, had been built from scratch in a few years at unthinkable expense in order to provide a sheikdom with a population of no more than 100,000 with Hassan al Korami's version of a world-class metropole and capital.

A huge dry lakebed had been excavated, lined with concrete, and then filled with water which by now was as brackish as the Dead Sea. Koramibad itself was built on an artificial island in the middle of Lake Korami. The city could be reached only by air, since there were no bridges over the lake, and the island was encircled by a fifty-foot-high concrete wall studded at ten-meter intervals with machine-gun emplacements; Hassan an Korami had no intention of suffering the fate of Hussein or his own father.

An eight-lane freeway circled the city, replete with electronic slogan boards and access control systems at the numerous on-ramps, though the only traffic on it were tanks and armored personnel carriers whenever his whacked-out troops managed to get some of them moving. Another freeway, somewhat more functional, connected the airport with the palace.

The rest of the city was one vast empty Potempkin Village. Broad radial avenues lined with huge parched-looking cedars kept barely alive with sprinkler systems at hideous expense converged on the central palace compound. Huge empty luxury apartment towers in perfect repair stood along most of these spotless and deserted streets. Other avenues sported ornate branches belonging to every major bank in the world. There was a Hilton, a Sheraton, a Meridien, a Ramada Inn, and a replica of the Waldorf Astoria, all subsidized and kept afloat by the Korami treasury. Similarly, the empty Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Harrod's, and GUM branches owed their survival to government subsidies, though Gucci, Tiffany, the Rolls Royce dealership, and Fredericks of Hollywood managed to survive on their own.

As the Rolls careened crazily towards the palace, Powell caught glimpses of what lay between the vast aisles of empty monoliths, to wit, enormous car parks choked with Hassan al Korami's impressive accumulation of tanks, armored personnel carriers, mobile artillery, Ka-

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tushka rocket launchers, anti-aircraft guns, jeeps, and assorted armored cars.

Powell found himself sucking nervously on his spliff and wishing for a few good stiff drinks as the Rolls crossed the drawbridge over the moat that surrounded the palace, for the moat swarmed with huge hungry Nile crocodiles and the spikes that studded the top of the palace compound wall were decorated with the rotting heads of minor criminals.

Inside, however, was a fair version of a desert-dweller's vision of paradise. The palace compound was built around a central garden done up as an Amazon rain forest. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of naked and splendid houris wandered about entertaining the troops. Parrots screeched, monkeys flitted through the treetops, and as Powell was ushered towards Korami's personal residence itself, he could hear a nasal version of Ravel's *Bolero* playing endlessly from hidden speakers.

Hassan al Korami's manse itself was a fifth-scale replica of the Taj Mahal replete with reflecting pool, and the throne room was a large, round, high-ceilinged chamber dripping with gold filigree studded with rubies, sapphires, and emeralds.

On a black marble dais in the center of the chamber, a vibrating skeletal figure in a white silk burnoose heavily embroidered in gold reclined on a vast, cushioned golden throne, sucking avidly on the ivory mouthpiece of an enormous hookah. Flanking the throne were a brace of Kalashnikov-toting Hashishins gumming the standard-issue spliffs. A semi-circle of huge plush cushions faced the throne, each provided with its own hookah. On one of these reclined an elegantly-coifed silver-haired man in a tan Yves Saint Laurent suit chewing nervously on the mouthpiece of his hookah as the man on the throne ranted and raved at him.

"Nukes, Armand, *nukes*!" demanded Hassan al Korami. "Me want me *nukes*! It's not as if I were demanding Trident submarines, or Stealth Bombers, or SS-25s, or even MX missiles! A few dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles will suffice, a brace of Pershings—by the beard of the prophet, I would even settle for some of those ancient B-52s which the Americans are planning to sell for scrap anyway. I would even pay well for a few Vulcans, if worse came to worst, surely at least the bankrupt British cannot afford to turn me down!"

With his long wild black hair, great flowing black beard, and huge glowing brown bloodshot eyes, the Scourge of the Infidel reminded Powell of nothing so much as a speed-freak Rasputin.

"Were it up to me, mon ami," said the urbane silver-haired man, "I would be pleased to provide your Sacred Cause with all the megatonnage and delivery systems you can afford. But alas, you have declared the Americans the Great Satan, the Russians Godless Atheistic Devils, the British effete limey bastards, the Germans krautheaded sons of bitches,

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the Chinese opium-eating degenerates, and the French a nation of frog-eating faggots. This, unfortunately, does not quite entice any of them to be cooperative. . . ."

"What!" screamed al Korami. "You dare to blame my courageous declarations of Allah's own truth for your own failures, you effete, krauthead, limey, frog-eating, degenerate, devil running-dog of the Great Satan!"

The guards cocked their Kalashnikovs eagerly. The silver-haired man coughed out a great lungful of smoke, trembling.

"Non, no, nein!" he exclaimed. "For who can deny the truth of your words, oh Lion of the Desert! Only spare this worthless servant, and I shall redouble my efforts in your behalf, for there may be a way. . . . Naturellement, it will be somewhat expensive. . . ."

"Nukes!" roared Hassan al Korami. "Me want me *nukes!* Move your ass, you perfidious infidel, and do not return without them!"

"I hear and obey, oh Scourge of the Infidel," the silver-haired man declared, rising to his feet, and bobbing his head in an endless series of bows as he backed out of the throne room past Elmer Powell, who stood there transfixed, sweating in his socks.

He favored Powell with a little smile and a wink en passant. "You are in luck, mon ami," he whispered sotto voce. "He's in a good mood today."

"*Elmer Powell?*" demanded Hassan al Korami, glaring at him with his great hash-reddened eyes.

"The same, your Majesty, your Magnificence, your ah . . . ah . . ." Powell stammered in no little terror.

"Be seated, Elmer Powell," Hassan commanded. "Toke up! Get your shit together with this primo Afghani!"

Powell collapsed onto the nearest cushion and sucked in a great lungful of smoke.

Hassan al Korami glowered at him. "One question you will answer, oh pundit of the infidels! Speak truly, and I will shower your Swiss bank account with tax-free hard currency, speak falsely, and I will add your head to the collection on my palace wall!"

"Trust me. . . ." Powell muttered fearfully, wondering what was coming next. Some cryptic sufi riddle? Some deadly zen koan? Some Koranic conundrum?

The Scourge of the Infidel puffed thoughtfully on his hookah. "Who," he finally demanded, "will be the next President of the United States?"

"*What?*"

"I have not yet torn out your tongue, have I? You are the same Elmer Powell who conducts the Powell Poll, are you not? Speak! Who is going to win the American presidential election?"

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Elmer Powell let out a great sigh of smoke, befuddlement, and relief. "Samuel T. Carruthers," he said.

Hassan eyed him peculiarly. "You are certain?" he said. "That asshole? On this you stake your life. . . ?"

"Popular vote 60 percent to 40 percent, plus or minus five points, minimum of 300 electoral votes, unless he drops dead or turns into a raving maniac on the tube before Election Day, and even then it would probably be no worse than even money," Powell said confidently. "It's a lock. America loves Uncle Sam."

Hassan al Korami broke into raucous laughter. "America loves Uncle Sam!" he howled as if it were the punchline of his favorite joke, and then he broke up again, rolling his eyes, shaking with mirth, and spraying spittle, a wired Rasputin indeed.

Still fairly gibbering with laughter, he waved a negligent hand in Powell's general direction. One of the guards yanked Powell to his feet and began escorting him out of the throne room.

"*That's it*?" Powell exclaimed. "A million dollars? An eight hour round-trip plane ride? Just for—"

"Mysterious are the ways of the Hassan the Assassin," said the guard, jamming another spliff into his mouth. "Be cool, and don't wake waves."

Only three weeks to go until election day and Samuel T. Carruthers was riding high and wide if not exactly handsome towards the apotheosis of his American Dream, a success story such as was only possible in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave! Where else but under the Red White and Blue could the proprietor of a seedy used car lot in Santa Ana California rise in glory within a decade to become President of the United States?

After serving his country in the crummy jungles of Central America for three years as a supply sergeant, Carruthers had skimmed just enough capital to leverage the purchase of a tacky used car lot in Santa Ana and its unsavory inventory of ancient clunkers. Shortly thereafter, while cruising along the Santa Ana Freeway in his five-year old Buick, he had driven by a billboard near Knotts' Berry Farm and been Born Again with the inspiration that was to change the course of history.

A cartoon Uncle Sam stood quite literally knee-deep in a sea of red ink glowering at the passing motorists and pointing an admonishing finger. Plowing through the waves around his kneecaps were a series of Chinese-type ships flying Japanese flags and piled to the gunwales with cars, VCRs, TV sets, and robots.

"Buy American!" shouted Uncle Sam in red white and blue letters, and lest anyone miss the point, the boats on the billboard also flew banners proclaiming "Cheap Jap Junk."

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"That's *it*, Margot!" Carruthers exclaimed, slapping his wife on the thigh with such distraction that he almost sideswiped the Toyota in the next lane.

"Up yours, you unpatriotic asshole!" he shouted at the Toyota driver when that worthy had the temerity to honk at his 100 percent red-blooded Detroit Iron. "Praise God, and our massive trade deficit, I've seen the light!"

And so, as it turned out, he had.

Carruthers sold off every foreign-made car on his lot at a dead loss, took out a third mortgage on his house, and restocked with the cheapest collection of crummy old American gas-guzzlers he could find. He renamed the establishment "Uncle Sam Carruthers' Red White and Blue One Hundred Percent American Used Car Lot." He bought himself a fraying Uncle Sam suit at a costume shop, had Margot let it out to more or less encompass his paunch, stuffed himself into it, bought commercial time on a local TV station, and, in the grand tradition of Southern Californian superstar used-car salesman, began starring in his own TV commercials, introducing the world to the spiel that, ten years and one bankruptcy later, was to make him President of the United States.

"Come on *down*, come on down to Uncle Sam Carrurthers' Red White and Blue One Hundred Percent American Used Car Lot!" he would declare as he stood before his clunkers in his Uncle Sam suit. "Wouldn't you rather buy an *American* used car from your old Uncle Sam than some overpriced piece of unpatriotic crap from a traitor to the American Way of Life? If you can't trust your old Uncle Sam, then *who can you trust*? Come on down, come on *down*, lookee here, lookee here, my fellow Americans, why here we have a 1985 Dodge Van, AM-FM stereo, power everything, and only 55,000 miles on the clock or fry me for a Rooshian, and the first five thousand takes it. Now I'm only willing to let this one go at such a loss because this cherry little darling was previously owned by a *genuine* American hero serving his country in Patagonia who was forced to put it on consignment due to war wounds which necessitate trading it in on a hand control model; and this brave lad can't get back on the road until I move this one off the lot and into the loving hands of one of you lucky patriots. . . .

"Come on down, come on *down*, and drive away with this 1980 Cadillac Seville, a mere 75,000 on the clock, and every last mile put on driving to church by a Gold Star Mother forced to sell it off and go on *welfare* when her husband lost his job at the Ford plant to coolie labor in Korea. . . ."

Well, what with the temporary oil glut of those years, and the rekindled sense of American patriotism, and the Buy American movement, and the unemployment, Uncle Sam Carruthers struck a chord in the public

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psyche. Not only was he able to move a lot of old moldy Detroit Iron at premium prices by wrapping his clunkers in the flag, he became as much a media hero as Ralph Williams or Cal Worthington ever had and then some, and was even invited from time to time to make the local LA talk-show circuit.

It was on one of these talk shows that he met the Reverend Allan Edward Wintergreen, and was Born Again as a franchiser.

Wintergreen was one of the most successful TV preachers in the country and certainly the richest, for he not only solicited contributions on his syndicated TV hour like all the others, he was the only one who sold *commercial time* between the sermons and the disco choir.

"God has brought us together to save the nation and make mucho dinero in the process, my boy," he told Carruthers, and once the silver-tongued preacher and his accountant laid it out in dollars and cents, Carruthers Saw the Light again.

Why not *franchise* a nationwide chain of Uncle Sam Carruthers' Red White and Blue One Hundred Percent American Used Car Lots? For 10 percent of the gross, the franchisee got to use the name and reap the benefit of the commercials that Uncle Sam Carruthers did on the Rev. Allan Edward Wintergreen's nationally syndicated TV show.

And since Carruthers was already mortgaged up to the eyeballs, the Rev. Wintergreen, who was rolling in dough, easily enough persuaded himself to put up the necessary capital in return for a mere 49 percent of the action.

All went swimmingly until the Great Oil Famine, when the oil producing countries wised up, suspended production entirely for three months, and then doubled the price.

All at once, Red White and Blue 100 Percent American gas-guzzling old Detroit Iron became virtually worthless and not all the patriotic appeals to national honor could move it off the lots, and franchisees went belly-up all across the country, soon to be followed by the home office itself, whose bankruptcy even threatened to drag down the Rev. Wintergreen's Church of Revealed Wisdom.

Broke, famous, without a pot to piss in or any prospects, what else could Uncle Sam Carruthers to do but run for the United States Senate? It was an easy transition. He just continued to run more or less the same commercials on the Rev. Wintergreen's TV show peddling himself instead of used cars, and made his live appearances in the same Uncle Sam suit, railing against the A-rabs and the Nips and the Rooshians who had done his business and the national enterprise in.

When the long-retired Johnny Carson refused to run against him, his election as junior senator from California was assured, and he hit Washington already a national hero. His picture was on *Time* and *Newsweek*

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and *People* and he even made the cover of *Rolling Stone*. He refused to waste his time with boring committee assignments, and instead concentrated on using the national TV coverage of the senate floor to best advantage, rambling on for at least an hour a week for the next four years, so that by the time the presidential primary season approached, he had twice the face and name recognition of his closest rival in the polls.

So too did the election itself turn into a Red White and Blue Cakewalk, for Uncle Sam was the most seasoned TV performer presidential politics had seen since Ronald Reagan, and not even Reagan had had the chutzpah to do his act in costume.

To clinch it, Rev. Wintergreen had twisted enough arms in the party hierarchy to make them hold their noses and nominate his fellow TV preacher, Fast Eddie Braithewaite, for Vice President.

Fast Eddie had first intruded upon the public consciousness as "The American Bob Marley," whose disco reggae records may never have climbed very high in the charts, but whose Reformed Rasta rap was good enough to launch him on a second career as a TV evangelist of a peculiar sort when his pipes began to give out in middle age.

"Lack of cash is the greatest evil in Babylon," he told his viewers. "All men are green in the eyes of Jah! No peckerwood's about to call you a nigger if you got a wallet full of credit cards, mon! Cast your bread upon the waters of Zion, and ye shall for sure be saved! It's *your* love donations that lets me loan out money at two points under the prime! Together, we build our Zion in the Belly of the Beast, and together, we make the First TV Bank of Babylon a Fortune 500 company!"

It was a stroke of genius, for while most blacks viewed Uncle Sam Carruthers as a honkie asshole and while more blacks than not viewed Fast Eddie Braithewaite as a con artist, how many blacks, in the privacy of the voting booth, could refrain from voting for the first *black* con artist to make the national ticket?

Moreover, this was also a dream ticket that rednecks and bigots could vote for with pride; they could vote for Uncle Sam Carruthers' Red White and Blue jingoism and feel smug about displaying their non-existent American sense of racial fair play in the bargain.

As for how either of these boobs could be expected to function as President, well, that was the sort of situation that the pros behind the scenes and the moneymen behind the pols knew could be professionally managed.

Three weeks from election day, riding high in the polls, Samuel T. Carruthers, accompanied by two Secret Service Men, went into the men's room after gorging himself on rubber chicken at a fund-raising speech at the Century Plaza Hotel.

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Five minutes passed, ten, a quarter of an hour, while the Press Secretary and the Campaign Manager fidgeted nervously, hoping Carruthers hadn't come down with the trots again, but somewhat fastidiously reluctant to interrupt the Great Man on the pot to inquire after the state of his bowel movements.

But after half an hour of this, there seemed nothing for it but to drag him off the crapper in time to make the plane to Minnesota.

The men's room was empty aside from two pairs of legs visible in adjacent toilet stalls. These proved to be the two Secret Service men, bound and gagged with their pants down around their ankles. The last thing they remembered was entering the men's room and being assailed by a horrible stench. When they woke up, they were tied and gagged on the toilet seats, and the next president of the United States was gone.

Just as they were all about to dash out of the john to raise posse and pandemonium, the Press Secretary's pocket phone rang.

"This is the Mendocino Liberation Front, running dog of the Drug Enforcement Agency, and we've got Carruthers stuffed in a gunny sack on the way to our secret headquarters in the Sierras," said a shrill, nasal, female voice. "Now listen carefully, here's the deal. We just want to like *educate* the next president of the United States for 24 hours; if you do what you're told, you can have the asshole back after that and no one's the wiser. But if a word of this gets to the press or any police agency, we'll feed him feet-first into a tree-chipper, and mail his head to the Washington *Post*. Power and profit to the Pot Farmers of America and our national trade balance! Boycott Colombian Imports! Buy American-grown Dope!"

The Press Secretary and the Campaign Manager did some fast, hard professional management thinking. If these maniacs did kill Carruthers and mail his head to the press, they'd be left with *Fast Eddie Braithewaite* at the head of their ticket. If they lost, they'd all be out of jobs, and if they won, they'd be out on the street anyway, because that crazy dude hated their guts. If they did as they were told, there was at least some chance they would get their meal ticket back.

Bottomline-wise, the smart money said keep your mouth shut and manage the situation as best you can as long as you can, like the Russians had been doing with the corpse of Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny for at least five years. After all, they were sophisticated professionals, and Uncle Sam Carruthers had not yet even croaked. Surely if the Russians could pull it off for all these years, American know-how could manage such a situation for at least 24 hours!

Fast Eddie Braithewaite had smelled the unmistakable odor of bullshit since the closing couple of weeks of the campaign. For one thing, while

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he and Carruthers had never exactly partied together, now neither he, nor anyone he had talked to had even been allowed in the same room with him. They flooded the air with a blizzard of old taped commercials, they cut old footage into a phony live interview show, and Samuel T. Carruthers made only a dozen or so more live appearances, the news coverage of which made it seem that he was luded out and badly lip-syncing a tape.

His victory speech had been broadcast late at night from his hotel room instead of in front of his loyal supporters and he had nodded off halfway through it and had to be elbowed in the ribs not quite off camera.

Between election night and the Inauguration, they kept him closeted on some private estate in Palm Springs putting together his government, and sure enough the expected gang of the usual suspects was rounded up for the Cabinet and the pros on the Campaign Staff segued into the White House.

Samuel T. Carruthers' Inaugural Day performance was more than Fast Eddie could finally pretend wasn't happening. He had taken the oath like a zombie on methedrine, babbling the whole thing out twice before the Chief Justice could more than open his mouth. During his speech, his mouth was hidden by a badly-placed podium, and he stood there staring motionless into space as if his feet had been nailed to the floor.

The day after that, Fast Eddie had stormed into a White House Staff meeting and demanded to see the President on threat of going to the press and telling them that he was taking over under the 23rd Amendment because the President had been captured in a palace coup.

"Don't say you didn't ask for this, then," the White House Chief of Staff had told him with a peculiar expression, and he and the entire inner circle stuffed themselves into helicopters which took them to Camp David.

The main lodge had been transformed. Half of it had been turned into an elaborate television studio and the other half of it was now some kind of medical facility.

"Where you got the fat boy stuffed?" Fast Eddie demanded.

"In a nice safe place."

They took him down a hall towards what had been the master bedroom. The wooden door had been replaced with a steel slab with a wire-barred window.

The Press Secretary whistled *Hail to the Chief.*

"Mr. Speaker, Members of Congress, Distinguished Guests, my fellow Americans," said the National Security Adviser, inviting Fast Eddie's attention to the window, "the President of the United States."

The entire bedroom had been turned into a huge and luxurious padded

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cell. Within, Samuel T. Carruthers sat naked on the pale beige matting, babbling and playing with himself.

"One Hundred Percent American Made Nookie in Red White and Blue cheerleader skirts put out for Uncle Sam as American as Apple Pie no cheap Jap junk. . . ."

"As you can see," said the Press Secretary, "we are having temporary technical difficulties."

"But nothing that can't be managed in a professional manner," said the Chief of Staff, and before Fast Eddie could even get his gaping mouth to close, they had hustled him off into a nearby cabin to talk bottom line.

"Be special nice to me, turkeys," Fast Eddie told them, "'cause I'm going to be the President of this Babylon in about the next two bars, mon! I mean, you got yourselves a crazy man in there, first time you need him live, they farm him to the bughouse and throw away the key."

The interchangeable faces of the White House Staff had the same smug interchangeable smiles of bureaucratic patronization painted across them as they sat there in their interchangeable conservative business suits looking down their thin little noses at the fast-talking Rasta who, unfortunately for them, was about to become president of the United States.

Velveeta and Kool Whip on Wonder Bread, mon! Fast Eddie was going to enjoy kicking their tight white asses out onto the end of the long unemployment lines where they belonged!

"What happened to the man? How long have you guys been sitting on this?" he demanded. "Speak true, or when I take over and lift the lid off this garbage can, you'll all have free unpaid vacations in Allenwood!"

"The President has merely been the victim of a terrorist act, from which the doctors assure us he will soon recover, if they want to keep their jobs," said the Chief of Staff.

"Terrorist act?"

"Something called the Mendocino Liberation Front had him for 24 hours."

"We found him on one of those chicken ranches in Nevada in a pretty heavy bondage scene," said the Press Secretary.

"To hear Uncle Sam tell it, they pumped him full of amphetamine, LSD, and L-dopa, and let him run wild in a roomful of hookers for a day and a night. . . ."

"Disgust you to hear it. . . ."

"But nothing, Mr. Vice President, that we can't *manage*. . . ."

"Media techniques are much more sophisticated than you might suppose these days," the Press Secretary said. "We have enough audio and videotape we can computer process to have Uncle Sam up and spouting brightly on the tube anything we want him to say. We have three actors

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undergoing plastic surgery to do live appearances. We can manage with a President who's crazy as a bedbug—"

"—After all, the Russians are still managing with Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny—"

"And everyone knows he's been dead for at least eight years."

"This may be Babylon, but it ain't Russia yet, my man," Fast Eddie said. "If the Vice President of the United States goes on the tube claiming the President is nuts, you're gonna have to show the fat boy doing his thing live in public. I'll demand fingerprint tests, I'll have dentists do a hologram of his teeth with lasers, and when he gets thrown in the bin, I'll be President and your asses are grasses."

"I don't think you're going to want to do that," said the National Security Adviser. "I mean, that might compromise national security, if you get me, and you might have to be terminated with extreme cement overshoes."

"Mon, you think you can snuff the Vice President of the United States before I get the people to listen to me?"

The Press Secretary laughed. "Credibility-wise, your Nielsen will be zero, kiddo," he said. "*No one* will believe that Uncle Sam is a drooling sex maniac because no one will *want* to. Because if Uncle Sam is a drooling sex maniac, then they've got themselves *you* for president. . . ."

"Besides," said the National Security Adviser, "there's always the Bulgorny option for the likes of you if you become too much of a problem."

"The Bulgorny option . . . ?" Fast Eddie said, suddenly quite sure that this dude meant some very extreme business.

"I mean, if the Russians can trot out Bulgorny to stand on Lenin's Tomb twice a year and make a speech to the Supreme Soviet just when people are getting to think he's gotten too moldy, you think we can't stuff and wire a vice president the same way to stand like a stiff at funerals?"

"And the first funeral you perform at if you open your mouth will be your own, Mr. Vice President," said the Chief of Staff. "We'll trot you out before the cameras and have you tell the nation your ridiculous charges were the result of drinking too much cheap muscatel and you won't feel a thing. You won't even be there."

"See, Mr. Vice President, it's all under control," said the National Security Adviser. "We've done a run on every possible scenario, we've covered all the angles. I'm sure that you'll now agree that we can manage just fine with a maniac in the White House and an audioanimatrated stiff for vice president if we have to."

"Well when you put it that way," owned the Vice President nervously, "it's kind of hard to argue with your logic."

Purchasing hashish in Moscow, like everything else, required stable, secure connections, connections with a self-interest in never selling you

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out to the authorities. Since no Soviet citizen could reliably predict when or whether he might find himself in Lubianka negotiating his own survival, finding a hashish connection with a minimal risk was no mean feat.

And indeed, by very virtue of being free market profiteers in the hashish trade, all of these connections were both anti-party elements by definition and employees, if not agents, of the KGB.

The Red Army had not only lost considerable clout on the Presidium over the Afghanistan fiasco, they had so bungled the economic situation that Sergei Polikov, the Czar of the KGB, had come out of it with all-but-total control of the whole hashish trade.

Now all the caravans led straight across the border into Turkestan where 250,000 Soviet troops lurked conspicuously, ready to blitzkrieg their way back into Afghanistan, should the Mujadin violate their part of the bargain.

Under these conditions, the Red Army could more or less keep their troops free of hashish dependency as long as they were stationed far away from major cities, the Soviet Union secured desperately needed hard currency, and the KGB could control the supply, set the prices, and limit the amount of hash that filtered into the domestic market from the vast re-export trade.

No doubt having secured control of the total supply, the KGB could just as easily have entirely eliminated the vast population of hash smokers that had blossomed in the Soviet Union during the period when 200,000 soldiers rotating in and out of Afghanistan every year had gone into business for themselves as free-market profiteers.

But by the time they cut the deal to end the war, Sergei Polikov saw that there were political as well as economic advantages to allowing the domestic trade to continue. Every dealer had to get his supply from someone else who sooner or later had to get it from the KGB. So the KGB could access the identity of any one of the hundreds of thousands of petty economic parasites involved in the trade, which meant that any one of them could be induced to inform when required. And these dealers, in turn, knew the identity, collectively, of several million Soviet Citizens who were guilty of an infraction punishable by five years of internal exile.

Never before had the KGB succeeded in extending its fine tendrils this far into the tender flesh of the masses. Somewhere in that Great Interrogation Cell in the Sky, Joseph Stalin and Lavrenti Beria were no doubt turning green with envy.

Ivan Igorovich Gornikov, however, had found, or been found by, a source with the mystical power to render itself invisible to the KGB.

Mustapha Kamani was a cultural attache at the Korami embassy, and

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seeing as how Koram had no culture to speak of to export, Kamani's true business in Moscow could be only one thing—purchasing agent for the government of Hassan al Korami, the largest single customer the KGB had.

No doubt the hash Kamani sold to a few favored Russian friends was skimmed from shipments going back to Koram, and therefore already signed, paid for, and disposed of on the KGB's books. Not even Sergei Polikov, indeed especially not Sergei Polikov, would ever arrest a golden goose with diplomatic immunity.

And even if he did, Kamani knew what would happen to him if he stooled on his Russian contacts, for his Russian contacts, at least the ones that Ivan knew, were all, like himself, comrades in the Computer Underground. In fact, there wouldn't even *be* a Soviet Computer Underground were it not for the Korami involvement.

While Hassan al Korami was reputedly quite able to pay for the tons of hashish he bought each year from the KGB out of petty cash, Koram had contrived to force the KGB to accept a portion of the price in rubles, and these rubles were acquired by smuggling in computer equipment in return diplomatic pouches, and selling the stuff to hardware-starved Russians at obscene prices. An ancient MacIntosh could fetch 15,000 rubles, the latest IBM mini would set you back 50,000, and people had been known to shell out 5000 for a 16k Sinclair. As for dot-matrix printers, these were worth their weight in caviar, since one could distribute samizdat on discs and print out copies at 200 cps.

There was only one thing that the KGB hated more than the Computer Underground, and that was the thought of losing the billions of hard dollars that Koram spent on hash in the Soviet Union each year.

But Ivan knew that if *he* were ever exposed as a member of the Computer Underground, if the KGB learned that *he* was being supplied with hash by the embassy of Koram, the whole game would be up for everyone.

For Ivan Igorovich Gornikov was the day shift operator on the Bulgorny, one of the select few with access to the software that was the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

And Ivan had taken great care to inform Mustapha Kamani of the hacking he had done on the Bulgorny, the better to motivate him into hoping he was never exposed as the foreign agent who had known this and had continued to get him stoned.

Which was why there was no real tension in the apartment that Kamani maintained across town from the embassy, for everyone there knew each other, they were all desperate characters, and everyone had every reason not to betray anyone else.

There was Boris, the night shift operator on the Bulgorny, and Tanya,

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who worked on the team that compiled the statistics at the Ministry of Agriculture, and Anatoly, who wrote programs that set production quotas for TV sets, cars, and toilet paper, and Grishka, who ran the computer that dealt with the waiting lists for apartments for all of Moscow. Among them, they had put enough bugs, practical jokes, and random noise into the software of state to send them all to Siberia for a million years if anyone found out, and they spent their stoned-out séances here in Mustapha Kamani's apartment vying with each other to do more.

". . . so the half share in a one room flat went to the professor of astrophysics, and the bubba who used to sweep the street outside got the luxury penthouse. . . ."

". . . which is why when next you crank him up to address the Supreme Soviet, Comrade Bulgorny will be able to boast that we lead the world in the production of toilet paper, though most of the people will still have to use *Pravda* since it has all been shipped to Novosibirsk. . . ."

"If only we dared to really have him say that!" Boris exclaimed as Kamani wrapped up a take-home for him in toilet paper, as if to boast of his unlimited access to such luxury items.

"Why not?" said Ivan. "All we have to do is mail-merge some old speeches on toilet paper production quotas with the stock attack on distribution inefficiencies when they ask for something to have him boast about and something with which to belabor the petty bureaucrats who are responsible for everything that goes wrong."

"Low toilet humor, if you ask me," giggled Tanya. "Boys will be boys."

"Perhaps one of you would care to part with 2000 rubles in return for *this*?" Mustapha Kamani suddenly said theatrically, pulling a floppy out of a pocket.

"2000 rubles for a piece of *software?"* Grishka scoffed. "Come off it, Mustapha, we can all write our own, thank you."

"Perhaps you are right, I am far from versed in such matters, though those who are have told me that there has never been such an insidious little bedbug as this," Kamani said, toking on the communal hookah.

"Oh?"

"What does it do?"

"It is called the Joker, my young friends, all the rage in western circles, according to the bourgeois press. It is written around a random number generator that, you might say, disappears into the system without a trace and overlays the interface of everything with everything. And once you've introduced it, there's no way of getting it out, short of wiping all the data and programs in the memory bank. . . ."

"Hashish for computers!" exclaimed Boris. "Why shouldn't they have some fun too?"

Ivan laughed. "Why shouldn't *Pyotr Ivanovich* have a chance to get

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stoned?" he said. "The poor bastard probably hasn't had any fun since he died."

"*The Bulgorny?*" exclaimed Boris. "You would randomize the programs and barble the memory banks of our beloved Party Chairman? You would have the Bulgorny begin babbling like Khruschev on vodka?"

"Even better than that," Ivan said. "Remember, if the forces on the Central Committee hadn't been in such perfectly balanced deadlock all these years, they would long since have buried Bulgorny in Lenin's tomb where he belongs and agreed on a live successor. . . ."

"The decision-making program!" exclaimed Boris.

"That's right, this little bedbug would randomize that too!"

"I love it, Ivan, I love it!"

"What are you two *talking about?*" Tanya demanded crossly.

"The deepest darkest secret of the Soviet State," Boris said, pulling on the hookah. "Shall we tell them, Ivan?"

"Are we not all comrades of the Computer Underground, Boris?" Ivan said, filling his lungs with smoke.

"The Central Committee, as you can well imagine, is frequently deadlocked," he told them. "In the old days, when you had a live Party Chairman and no one could muster a majority against him, that was that. Now they ask the Bulgorny to break deadlocks."

"*The Bulgorny!*" exclaimed Grishka. "But Pyotr Ivanovich has been dead for four years!"

"Eight."

"Six."

"Whatever. The Chairman is just an embalmed corpse wired for motion and sound; how can such a thing decide anything?"

"Each member of the Central Committee has a weighted vote calculated by the computer according to his current rating in the power struggle as determined by secret polling of his rivals. These are tabulated statistically via an Australian ballot system until a mathematical consensus emerges. This is interfaced with the memory banks via an index program which selects and edits old Bulgorny speeches so that the Chairman can announce his decisions in his own familiar deadly prose."

"Bulgorny can write his own speeches?" Grishka said.

"Better than he did when he was alive," said Boris. "The computer that controls him remembers every boring word he ever uttered, and if he were alive to suffer that, it would surely kill him!"

"And if this Joker program inserts random interfaces between the statistical data and the tabulation . . ."

"And between the decision-making program and the memory banks, where the index program should be . . ."

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"Then decisions of the Soviet State will be made by rolling the software bones. . . ."

"And Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny will deliver them in gibberish. . . ."

"Which no one will dare point out . . ."

"Which everyone must therefore pretend to understand . . ."

"And they won't be able to fix it without finally burying the Chairman. . . ."

"Which they'll never do until the corpse starts to rot!"

Mustapha Kamani had been laying back and sucking on his hookah during all of this, nursing a secret little smile. Now that smile became a supercilious grin. "Ah, you Russians are such a marvelous people!" he said. "In the effete West, this Joker program is used for mere sport; practical jokers insert it in each other's video games, and scramble the data of collection agencies, but here in mother Russia, it becomes a weapon against the state."

"Come on, lighten up, Mustapha!" Tanya said. "We're not enemies of the state."

"We're hackers, not anti-Soviet elements."

"And hackers just want to have fun."

Armand Deutcher slurped down another oyster with a hefty swallow of Muscadet, then leaned back in his chair expansively, as if to wrap himself in the aura of La Coupole. Once, long ago, this noisy barn of a Saint Germaine cafe had been a gathering place for somber Parisian existentialists, later a show business hangout, then a tourist trap, and now it was a huge house of assignations for the arms dealers, foreign agents, and American political exiles who were said to make up a quarter of Paris's current population. It was a place one went to for ambiance, not haute cuisine nor noble vintages, but there was little the chef could do to ruin raw oysters in season.

"Surely you would not wish to see this contract go to East Bloc sources, Zvi," Deutcher said. "You're my last hope; unless you agree to supply the warheads, Hassan will turn to the Soviets, and we'll lose the delivery system deal as well."

"Even from you, I can't believe this," Zvi Bar David said, spooning a gooey dark morsel of profiterole au chocolat into his mouth. "Even the Russians aren't crazy enough to sell nuclear missiles to a maniac like Hassan al Korami, and we both know it. *Israel* should sell him nukes? As if he'd buy them from us in the first place!

"Ah but naturellement, he is never to know that his warheads are Israeli," Deutcher said. "You will deliver them to the South Africans, who will allow them to pass over to Zaire, who will sell them to to the Angolans, who will assure the Koramis that they were made in Czech-

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oslovakia and bartered to the Cubans through East Germany in return for mercenary troops to fight the Rastafarian resistance in South Jamaica."

"What can you possibly imagine would induce us to do such a thing?"

"What else?" Deutcher said good-naturedly. "Money!"

"Surely you cannot expect us to sell nuclear weapons to that anti-Semitic maniac at any price!"

"You sold him those Kfirs, didn't you?"

"We sold them to Singapore, who sold them to Taiwan, who moved them to the Chinese through Hong Kong, who bartered them to the Iranians for oil, and the Iranians told Koram that they had picked them up when the Brazilians overran Paraguay."

"Come, come, Zvi, be all that as it may, the Mossad certainly knew where they were going!"

Zvi Bar David shrugged. "Who could resist?" he admitted with a grin. "They were Yom Kipper War vintage junk. Not even the Haitians would buy them. If we had surplus Spitfires, we'd be happy to unload the mess on Hassan too! But we're certainly not going to sell Koram ordnance that they can really use against us, let alone nuclear warheads!"

"But of course, mon ami," Deutcher said slyly. "Au contraire, what I propose is that we together sell Koram twenty nuclear missiles for ten billion dollars that *you* can use against *him*."

Bar David eyed him narrowly now, wiping chocolate sauce from his chin. Armand Deutcher nodded.

"From Senegal via Algeria, I have acquired twenty truly moldy American F-111s that the Vietnamese appropriated way back when they overran Saigon," he told Bar David. "At ten percent over scrap prices, since their airframes and engines have only a few thousand miles left in them and not even a kamikaze pilot would dare to try to fly them. . . ."

"They were dreadful dogs even when they were new, as I remember," Bar David observed critically.

Deutcher nodded. "A shining example of American overcomplication," he agreed. "But bon chance for us, for the Americans equipped these aircraft with low-level terrain-hugging radar systems, the immediate forerunner of the cruise missile systems they developed later. . . ."

"I seem to remember some small problem with the swing-wings falling off. . . ."

"Ah, but that is not *our* problem, now is it, Zvi?" Deutcher said airily. "As fighter-bombers, they may be disasters, but imagine them as big, cheap, fast, highly unreliable cruise missiles!"

"I think I'm beginning to get your drift, Armand. . . ."

"But of course! Stick some kind of crude nuclear device in the bomb bay, wire it up with remote controls off your supersonic reconnaissance

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drones, and voila, twenty cut-rate supersonic medium-range cruise missiles that should cost us about half a million apiece at worst to sling together, and which we can then unload on Hassan al Korami for *five billion* dollars, and frankly, as you have already surmised, my ass is in a sling on the warheads, so I'll split the profits right down the middle, meaning Israel's balance of payment situation is improved by two billion dollars courtesy of the Scourge of the Infidel!"

Bar David scooped up a spoonful of his dessert and savored the heavy dark chocolate sauce thoughtfully. "It certainly is tasty . . ." he admitted. "But unthinkably dangerous! Three billion for us, one for you."

"Dangerous only to Hassan al Korami," Deutcher told him, knowing that this was the clincher. "For *you* will be supplying the remote guidance systems, n'est ce pas . . ."

"So we will," Bar David said slowly. "So we will. . . . 60–40."

Armand Deutcher laughed. "Make it 55–45, and I'll also throw in a consignment of third-hand Japanese game-computers I bought in Shanghai complete with a cartridge called *Cruise Missile Commander* which is close enough to the real thing to convince hashish-sodden maniacs who have never even seen a video game."

"We could build a big fancy console around the video game computer for the controllers to play with, projection TVs, joysticks, maybe even stereo sound . . ."

"And then jumble a great heap of junk with a lot of flashing lights and LCD readouts in the cockpit and hide the real control circuit on a chip somewhere in the works. . . ."

"So if they ever launch the things, we just take over . . ."

"And drop them harmlessly into the sea!"

"Perhaps . . ." said Zvi Bar David.

Deutcher laughed. "You wouldn't be thinking of having the Scourge of the Infidel aim at Tel Aviv and hit, peut etre, Mecca?"

"What a delicious notion, Armand!" Bar David exclaimed. "He would then be honor-bound to declare Holy War against himself!"

"Being First Lady certainly hasn't been anything like what Sam promised so far," Margot Carruthers whined.

"Why are you bitching about it to me, mama?" Fast Eddie Braithewaite demanded. "You think I like this shit any more than you do?"

"No, Mr. Vice President, I don't," Mrs. Carruthers said coldly. "That's why I think you and I can make a deal."

For the first time since she had called him from a pay phone and insisted he meet her in the Watergate garage, Fast Eddie started to take the First Lady seriously.

For sure, what with her old man confined in a padded cell by his staff

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and unable therefore to throw the White House parties and take her on the helicopter rides he had promised her, she had her reasons for being pissed off.

And as for himself, Fast Eddie was grinding his molars into stubs as he was constrained to attend funerals and keep his mouth shut, while all the while he should have long since moved into the Oval Office where he belonged.

"A deal?" he said. "What do you and me have to dicker over?"

Margot Carruthers slithered a little closer to him across the back seat of her rented Mercedes. "I thought *you'd* understand, Fast Eddie," she said breathily but hesitantly. "I mean, you people invented rock and roll, didn't you, you're in tune to the . . . ah . . . jelly roll vibrations. . . ."

"*Say what?*"

She-yit, was Uncle Sam Carruthers' old lady *coming on to him?* He didn't know whether to laugh or puke.

"Sam and I hardly got it on together for years," she told him. "It got so I finally forgot what it felt like to be really turned on, so I hardly even missed it any more."

She sighed. She smiled blissfully. "But then, after Sam came back from whatever those terrorists did to him, before those White House staff creatures threw me out of our bedroom and turned it into a padded cell, Sam screwed my brains out. All night long. Over breakfast. In the bathtub. I haven't had it so good in twenty years."

Fast Eddie goggled at her in amazement.

"Don't look at me like that!" she said. "I may not look like it now, but back when Sam was slogging around in Central America for three years, I had my little fling as a queen of the singles bars. I even turned a trick or two in my time for the hell of it. So when boring old Sam turned into a bright green pleasure machine, I had juicy enough memories to be reawakened, and now I'm so horny all the time I could scream."

Aghast, Fast Eddie sidled across the seat away from her until his back was pressed up against the door handle. "*Mrs. Carruthers,*" he said, "what *are* you trying to tell me?"

"Look at me," she told him. "Not so bad for 55 if I do say so myself, but I'm not going to make out with the beautiful people at my age, and the First Lady of the United States would be a little conspicuous in a disco. Besides, it was like a second honeymoon, not that the first one was any great shakes."

She gritted her teeth in determination. "I don't care if Sam is competent to be President of the United States or not, I want him in my bed, not in a padded cell, and I *don't* want him cured. I *prefer* my husband as a sex maniac."

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"All right, mama, what did you have in mind?" Fast Eddie exclaimed. "I always was a sucker for true romance!"

"You get to fly around on Air Force One," Margot Carruthers said, creeping up on him again. "I get to visit Sam. I get him out of his cell and into a helicopter, and you have the plane ready and waiting at Dulles. We'll fly him to Los Angeles and put him on *America Tonite.*"

"And they'll toss him right back in the bin!"

"But you'll be President, Fast Eddie. And if Ford could get away with pardoning Nixon as part of his deal, surely you can let us ride off somewhere into the sunset together. All I want out of this is my man."

"How you gonna get him out of the cell?"

"With a few twists and turns . . ." Margot Carruthers said, wriggling her thighs against him.

"And what about the Captain of Air Force One?" Fast Eddie said, leaning toward her.

"Oh, he wasn't bad for someone who wasn't exactly my type," she said with a feral grin. "What about the next President of the United States? I mean, don't be insulted, but I always had this thing about the back seats of cars and black men."

"Funny you should say that. I always had this thing about married white women who had a thing about black men."

"Today is the day, now is the hour, now will the Scourge of the Infidel kick Zionist ass!" declared Hassan al Korami.

TV lights outshone the desert sun, befuddled reporters muttered idiot commentary into their mikes like color men in the fourth quarter of a very one-sided football game, and the palace guards surrounding the little reviewing stand upon which the Scourge of the Infidel stood stroked their Kalashnikovs nervously and hazed Hassan in a cloud of smoke from their spliffs, so that the cameramen cursed under their breath as they tried to keep sharp focus on the figure before the huge makeshift tent.

Korami troops and officials and the foreign press corps alike eyed each other paranoiacally across the tarmac, the former scandalized at the unseemly sight of hundreds of running dog mouthpieces of Satan polluting the purity of sacred Korami soil with their evil machineries, and the latter eyeing the drug-crazed, red-eyed, machinegun-caressing troops with no little dread, and wondering why the Lion of the Desert had opened his borders to the foreign media for the first time in his reign for the purpose of staging this airport press conference.

Three days ago, the major European, American, Soviet, and Japanese news networks had been invited, indeed all but commanded, to produce their minions here in Koramibad International Airport for an announcement modestly promised to "change the course of world history."

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One by one, their planes had landed, and been surrounded by heavily armed and even more heavily loaded Korami troops. The reporters and crews were allowed to deplane with their equipment, and they were all hustled out here, where bulldozers had piled up rusty fighter planes in great heaps to clear an area in the great aerial junkpile large enough to erect the enormous tent which apparently concealed Hassan's big surprise.

"Hear, oh Israel!" the Scourge of the Infidel shrieked into his mike, sucking on the mouthpiece of a large hookah, and apparently beginning to work himself up into a proper rage. "Hear the words of Hassan al Korami, oh ye bloodsucking Zionist camel-humpers and despair! Within four days and four nights, you shall remove your unclean presence from all of Holy Jerusalem and withdraw all your troops to the east bank of the Jordan River. Every Jew, every synagogue, every kosher delicatessen, must be cleansed from Jerusalem by the dawn of the fifth day. So commands Hassan al Korami, Sheik of Koram, Lion of the Desert, Scourge of the Infidel, Master of the Holy Hashishins!"

Mutters of astonishment, raucous laughter, and then an ugly growl of ire issued forth from the press. The crazy son of a bitch had finally ODed on his own hash! He had been issuing asshole demands on the Israelis since he had assumed the throne, and now here he was standing the midst of hundreds of junk fighter planes toking up and demanding their surrender!

That much was funny, but good enough to make the nightly half-hour news it was not, and that wasn't funny at all, because the crazy bastard had dragged them all out here into this miserable desert at great expense to themselves for a story that didn't exist. And there wasn't even any booze.

"You dragged our asses all the way out here for this!" the News Director of NBC roared in outrage to a chorus of guttural agreement. "You can't treat the world press this way, you bedsheet-wearing little pissant! Believe me, you're going to pay heavily, imagewise, for this stupid little joke!"

The Scourge of the Infidel regarded him expressionlessly. He puffed on his hookah. He smiled thinly, and pointed at the Senior Network Figure with the little finger of his left hand.

Five palace guards forthwith trained their Kalashnikovs on him and blew him away.

"Do I have your attention now, mouthpieces of the Great Satan?" Hassan al Korami asked sweetly. "Here is what you came for," he said as the flaps of the great tent behind him began to fall away. "If one Israeli remains in Jerusalem or west of the the Jordan River on the morning of the fifth day, I shall use *these*!"

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But when the tent was down, the TV cameras found themselves recording the sight of nothing more earth-shaking than five more of Hassan's vast collection of moldering fighter-planes, notable only for the fact that they were even more ancient and decrepit than most of the rest of them.

"Jeez, those are F-111s!" someone exclaimed. "Thirty years old if they're a day!"

"You will observe their markings, infidels," said Hassan al Korami.

The five antique F-111s had been given new coats of Korami green which was already starting to blister and flake off the rusting metal beneath. On the wings and rear fuselages, the Korami ensign—a marijuana leaf crossed by a machinegun—had been inlaid in gold leaf.

On the noses of the F-111s, a white circle bore words in Arabic, English, and Hebrew lettered in Israeli blue:

Tel Aviv.
Haifa.
Eilat.
Beersheba.
Galilee.

"Those are the targets we will destroy: Israel's populations centers and its Jordan River Irrigation System," declared Hassan al Korami. "Unless our commands are followed promptly and with perfection, we will turn the Zionist state into a radioactive desert where no one lives and nothing grows."

"*With those?*" a hidden voice called, and the press corps had to choke back giggles for fear of arousing further admonitory gunplay.

But Korami ignored the lèse majesté this time. "You are now invited to come forward and examine the triumph of Korami military technology, the Sword of Hassan Supersonic Nuclear Cruise Missile," he said, his bloodshot eyes gleaming with the collector's true passion. "With a range of 2000 miles at a speed of a thousand miles an hour, with terrain-following radar that allows it to come in right down on the deck like an Exocet 3000, the latest in computer control technology, and a quarter megaton nuclear warhead."

For the better part of an hour, the reporters and technicians were allowed to pore over the aircraft. Whether half of these wrecks could fly from here to Israel before their wings fell off was problematical, but if they could go the distance, it would certainly seem that they could zip in under any radar, for the ancient original terrain-hugging guidance systems still seemed more or less functional, and that was what they had been designed to do.

They were handed geiger counters and allowed to probe the bomb bays with them amidst much clicking and moaning. The cockpits were

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crammed with enough electronic bric-a-brac to mix a record album, and there was a control van with enough monitors and keyboards and joysticks to impress the hell out of the reporters and air personalities and make wonderful high-tech footage.

But the camera and sound technicians were less than totally impressed, though they kept their amusement to themselves.

For the educated eye could detect that all this had been jumbled together out of crazily mismatched modules of this and that cannibalized from bits and pieces of Commodore game computers, Japanese TV sets, Build-A-Robot kits, and what looked like the innards of old Moog synthesizers. As to what it all did, one would have had to have been a member of the Russian Computer Underground to be crazy enough to try to trace the circuits out.

"Tell the world that Hassan al Korami speaks truly," the Scourge of the Infidel told the thoroughly shaken world press when these examinations were concluded. "If the Zionist oppressors do not obey my commands to the letter, in five days I shall nuke them into extinction!"

Then he nodded to his palace guard commander. "Remove these verminous mouthpieces of Satan from our Sacred Soil now," he said negligently.

And, with a disdain that would have made many a former American President rub his hands and chortle, the ladies and gentlemen of the world press were booted and prodded back to their planes at gunpoint, and sent on their way in a barrage of ink bottles and random automatic weapons fire.

"Come on Sam, get serious, just do what I tell you, and we'll get you out of here," Margot Carruthers said, as the President of the United States felt her up in his padded cell.

"They haven't let me have any nookie for weeks! Old Oscar Meyer wants some sesame seed buns!"

"All right, all right, we'll play hide the banana," Margot told him, not at all displeased with the thought. "But when we do I'm going to scream and yell like you're forcing me to do it!"

"Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!" said the President.

"When the guard comes in," the First Lady said, "leave everything to me, and do what I tell you. . . ."

"Rape! Rape! Ooo! Eee! Aaah! Aaah! Aaah! *Aaah!*"

Sergeant Carswell was under strict orders not to enter the Presidential padded cell, but when he heard the screams and grunts and sounds of struggle coming from within, gentlemanly instinct intervened, and he found himself dashing inside before he could think about it.

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The President of the United States, naked, had the First Lady's dress hiked up over her stomach, and was humping away at her grunting *Hail to the Chief.*

The sight of this obscene state of the union shorted out a synapse in Sergeant Carswell's Christian and patriotic brain. Which is to say that Supreme Commander or no, no god-fearing patriotic American could allow this shit to continue.

He dashed across the floor matting, and grabbed the President in a half-nelson, yanking him upwards and backwards off the First Lady, then spun him around and flung him into a padded wall.

He felt something move up behind him, and turned around just in time to see Margot Carruthers' haymaker as it collided with his jaw.

"Remember, Sam, you're *the President!* Don't let these flunkies push you around; show them who's boss," Margot Carruthers told the President when she had gotten him out into the corridor. "Don't take any lip."

Hand in hand with her stark naked husband, the First Lady walked down the corridor towards the first checkpoint, where two young Marine guards stood blocking their passage standing at at ease.

"Aten-*shun*!" bellowed the ex-supply sergeant and used car salesman.

The two befuddled Marines popped to attention reflexively and then started fumbling with their holsters and staring at each other uncertainly at the sight of their Commander in Chief standing suddenly before them butt naked.

"What are you fruits staring at?" the President demanded. "Haven't you ever seen such a Supreme Commander before?"

"Uh . . . ah . . . Mr. President, we have orders . . .'" stammered one Marine.

"*I* give the orders around here!" bellowed the President. "I'm the President of the United States ain't I, and all those communists who didn't let me have any nookie are all fired as of now!"

"C-communists!" exclaimed the other Marine.

"That's right," said Margot Carruthers, "the White House Staff has been taken over by Albanian agents and they've tricked you into believing my husband is crazy by taking away his clothes, feeding him Spanish Fly, and forcing him to watch hour after hour of Russian soap operas."

"And they didn't let me have any nookie, either," the President said petulantly.

"Help us to escape, and you'll both be heroes," said the First Lady.

"Better than that, I hereby make both of you four star generals as of now," said the Commander in Chief. "Now who do you say is crazy, boys?"

"Four star generals?"

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"Can he do that?"
"If he's still President."
"Shit man, *is* the dude still President?"
One Marine smiled at the other.
"He is as long as we say he is, now isn't he?"
"Where to, Mr. Prez . . . ?"
"The nearest helicopter," said Margot Carruthers.

By the time the presidential party had reached the helipad, Camp David had been at least temporarily secured. The non-coms had been promoted to general, the privates had suddenly made sergeant, the officers had been busted and arrested for treason, the doctors and shrinks were assured of lucrative Medicare payments, and all the TV personnel were promised presidential letters of introduction to big time Hollywood producers.

The President, bundled into a blanket, and the First Lady, doing most of the talking, boarded a helicopter which speedily conveyed them to the airport, where it landed directly beside Air Force One, already warmed up on the runway and cleared for takeoff.

Once safely in the air, they were greeted in the plush presidential cabin by Vice President Fast Eddie Braithewaite and Captain Bo Bob Beauregard, the crew commander and pilot, a big beaming blond hunk, who winked at the First Lady, saluted the President, and fixed his noble visage in his best heroic fly-boy expression.

"Don't worry, Mr. President, as of now you're safe in the hands of the United States Air Force," he said. "Margot here told me all about how those Cuban agents secretly replaced the White House staff with East German clones who kidnapped you and forced you to endure unspeakable perversions with Russian diesel dykes. Makes my blood boil to think of it, but let me assure you that the Air Force of the United States is behind you one hundred percent! Why don't you have us take 'em all out with our Gorilla Killa mini cruise missiles? Shit, we can fly those sweet little sons of bitches right up their assholes!"

Fast Eddie looked as if he had fallen down a rabbit hole. The President stroked himself reflectively, as if considering it.

"Wait a minute, Bo Bob . . . er, Captain Beauregard," the First Lady said. "You just fly us to Burbank."

"Aw come on, Margot," the President whined, "let's have some fun."

"We'll have plenty of fun, Sam, when we get to Hollywood!"

The President's expression immediately brightened. "We're going to Hollywood?" he exclaimed. "Oh boy, oh boy! I'm gonna get me some movie stars just like John F. Kennedy!"

"Better than that, Sam," Margot Carruthers told him, choking down

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her irritation. "You're going to go on *television*. You're going to address the nation."

"I am?" said the President. "What am I supposed to say? Do I have to read a speech?"

"*Uncle Sam Carruthers* don't need no jive speechwriter, now does he?" Fast Eddie told him, grinning. "You're the *President*, mon, you can say anything that comes into your honkie head, all you gotta do is let it all hang out."

"That's right Sam, you just go on as if you were still selling old Buicks and tell the American people whatever you think they ought to hear," Margot Carruthers said, giving him a little goose. "We'll see about movie stars later." And when they see what a horny old billygoat you've become, Sam Carruthers, she thought, I'll have you all to myself.

Somewhere over Colorado, Captain Bo Bob Beauregard reappeared in the Presidential cabin, scratching his head. By now, Margot had gotten the President more or less into his Uncle Sam suit, though there was no way she could get him to keep his fly zipped up.

"Mr. President, there sure is some weird traffic on the air from down below," Captain Beauregard said. "Some crazy A-rab has got himself hold of some cruise missiles, and he's threatening to nuke the Hebes if they don't give up Jerusalem, and now the Israelis are sayin' screw you, Charlie, everybody knows we have no nukes, but if you lob one at us, we could acquire 50 Slings of David mobile ICBMs with one megaton warheads faster'n hot baboon shit through a tin horn, and your entire ass is radioactive glass."

"Sure you're not listening to Radio Free Gonzo and doing spliffs up there?" Fast Eddie said. "Sounds like you've got some spaced-out dj thinks he's Orson Welles."

Captain Beauregard frowned. "Hell boy, I've been on the horn to the button room, and they're freaking out. They sure as shit want to go on Red Alert, batten down, and get our Sac B-1s in the air just in case, but all they can get from Washington is 'no comment' from the White House Press Secretary and 'it's not my job' from the Secretary of Defense."

"You tell them not to listen to anything those Commie spies tell them!" the Commander in Chief shouted. "Uncle Sam Carruthers is back in charge now! You tell my generals that I'm going on the air to address the nation, and when I do, I want my Air Force to be ready to vaporize the Godless Atheistic Rooshians and the crazy A-rabs and the smart-ass Jews and anyone else who gives us any crap when I tell them to!"

"Yessiree, Mr. President!" Captain Beauregard enthused, saluting. "That's just what the United States Air Force has been waiting to hear!"

"Wait a minute!" shouted Fast Eddie. "You can't do that!"

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"Why not, boy?" demanded Bo Bob Beauregard.

"Because . . ." Because the fat boy is bananas, Fast Eddie had been about to say, but one look at the granite set of this peckerwood's patriotic jaw disabused him of any such notion. "Because . . . because . . . because they won't believe you, mon!" he finally blurted. "The White House staff has got half a dozen actors who can fake the President's voice! They'll countermand the orders! They'll have the Secret Service grab us as soon as we get off this plane!"

"Can they do that, Captain?" the President said fearfully. "Can they lock me up again and take my nookie away?"

"You don't worry none about *that*, Mr. President," Captain Beauregard said triumphantly. "We're always prepared in the United States Air Force."

He went into a cabinet and came back with a bright red mobile phone. "This little sucker goes straight to a secure satellite in geosyncronous orbit, and then right down into the button room by tight laser-beam. They got a voice-analyzer on the other end that will tell them it's you, and all I've got to do is verify it's a live broadcast. You just get on the horn and tell them to go to Condition Black. That means they put all strategic forces on full Red Alert, seal up the control center, and accept no orders that don't come right through that phone in the authenticated voice of the President of the United States."

Beaming, the President took the red phone.

"Sam, I don't think you should do this," Margot Carruthers said nervously as he played with the phone with one hand and himself with the other.

"You're always telling me what not to do, Margot!" the President whined. "Don't you have another Martini, Sam, Sam you're driving too fast, you keep your eyes off those cheerleaders, Sam! Well I'm the President of the United States now, and no one's going to tell me what I can't do, not my mother, not the Rooshians, and not you!"

"Give 'em hell, Mr. President!" Captain Beauregard said brightly, as he showed him how to get an operator.

"Hello, hello, this is the President. . . . What do you mean I should hang up and dial directly myself?"

"This is Radio K-RAB, the Rockin' Voice of the A-rabs, beamin' a hundred thousand watts of Good Vibrations right at ya, all you crazy Shiite and Sunni mamas and pappas you, from our Ship of Rock and Roll Fools out here in the Gulf, and here's the Big Number Twelve on Radio K-RAB today, *Jihad Jump* by Abou Abou and the Hashishins, right after this word from Kalashnikov, the state of the art in automatic rifles, and at a price you don't have to be an oil sheik to afford!"

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had jury-rigged in the control room of the seaborn pirate radio station.

Even as Zvi Bar David had predicted, Hassan al Korami had not waited for the full shipment of Sword of Hassan cruise missiles to arrive before he did his dingo act. So far, so good.

Now NBC was reporting that the Israelis had issued their own ultimatum. Hassan had four days to surrender his nuclear cruise missiles to Israel or they would take them out with their mighty high-tech air force without the need to resort to nuclear preemption. Since Koram had threatened Israel with nuclear annihilation, they could hardly be blamed by world opinion if they launched an all out air attack against the miscreant as long as they righteously kept their own nukes hidden under the rug.

And now Radio Moscow was reporting that Hassan al Korami was falling right into the trap. He had just declared that the moment an Israeli aircraft crossed his borders, he would annihilate Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beersheba, Eilat, and the Jordan River Irrigation System.

They were goading Hassan into it. The Israelis would probably wait till the deadline just to keep him getting hotter. Then they would hit the Sheikdom of Koram with about a thousand or so drone fighter-bombers firing Pitchfork metal-seeking missiles which would destroy Koram's forces utterly while the world stood on and cheered.

Deutcher only hoped that the Israelis wouldn't be *too* efficient. He had several billion francs riding on Hassan getting at least one of his cruise missiles off the ground before they were taken out by the Israeli luftblitz, and he would be a lot happier if the Israelis made sure he fired first.

After all, what difference did it make to them? Even if the Lion of the Desert managed to launch all five, the Israelis would just dump them all into the sea anyway, or so at least they should think.

Now there was danger of a major financial setback. Deutcher had counted on the Israelis wanting to let Hassan get at least one missile in the air so they could make him hit Mecca; indeed, he had given Zvi Bar David the idea free of charge.

Then, with the mighty hundred-thousand-watt transmitter of K-RAB, the Rockin' Voice of the A-rabs, *he* could take control of the missile that the Israelis took away from Hassan's controllers and use it where it would do the most good.

It had cost him good money to rent this pirate radio ship too, let alone how deep he had dug to leverage his real estate speculation, and now the Israelis threatened to throw a monkey-wrench into the works!

Ivan Igorovich Gornikov had never seen the Central Committee in

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such a state, and he had seen plenty as the dayshift operator of the Bulgorny all these years!

When Hassan al Korami had issued his first ultimatum to Israel, they had convened immediately, and when the Israelis had threatened to destroy his missiles by non-nuclear means, they had gone into permanent session, and when Hassan had declared he would launch his nukes on warning, they had panicked and repaired here, to the Dacha, to the emergency control center buried half a kilometer down in the heart of the Urals.

And that had been the only consensus these Heroes of Socialist Labor had managed to reach. Marshal Borodin conceived the notion that this was somehow the ideal time to blockade Berlin. The Foreign Ministry advised a peace offensive, that they should side with whoever was attacked first. Sergei Polikov insisted they side with Hassan to protect his best hashish customer. The Minister of Finance agreed. The Minister of Propaganda believed that they should side with Israel, who would have world opinion on their side if they were nuked. And by now all of them were hoarse with exhaustion and repeating themselves endlessly.

And all the time, Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, his skin varnished and polymerized to a high gloss and rouged to a ruddy glow, sat there at the head of the table, silent, motionless, and imperturbable. Admittedly, the Chairman's failure to panic like the rest of them owed a certain debt to the fact that he was dead.

As for Ivan Igorovich Gornikov, his state of mind was anything but tranquil, for he knew the signs. The Central Committee was quite thoroughly deadlocked, and by now most of them were drunk. The moment they found themselves faced with an unavoidable decision, they would ask the Bulgorny to speak.

And Ivan, alas, had already fed the Joker program into Pyotr Ivanovich's memory banks and decision-making software. He had no idea what kind of gibberish would issue forth from the speaker behind the corpse's teeth when they told him to put the question to the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. For better or worse, the Soviet Union would soon be at the command of a randomized collective decision-making process.

"This was just received from our embassy in London," said a minor Ministry functionary, handing a single piece of paper to the Foreign Minister. "It was called in from a pay phone by someone who claimed to represent the Mossad."

The Foreign Minister read it and went pale as a sheet.

"What is it, Nikolai?" demanded Polikov. "You look as if you have bitten into a turd."

"Apparently the Mossad is now afraid that their own government is

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about to go too far," the Foreign Minister said. "According to this, if any of Hassan's missiles should actually hit anything, they will use it as an excuse to destroy him using their own nuclear arsenal, announcing its existence thereby, and forcing the world to accept Israeli hegemony over the Middle East as a new nuclear superpower. The Mossad begs the Soviet Union to force Koram to capitulate to the Israeli ultimatum to prevent extreme Zionist elements from accomplishing this."

"They're right! We cannot allow the Israelis to rule the Middle East!"

"Pre-empt them!"

"Pre-empt *who*?"

"Israel!"

"Koram!"

"Berlin!"

They continued to scream and shout at each other, fortifying themselves with more vodka, but soon enough the unwholesome contumely began to run out of energy, and one by one, the members of the Central Committee fell silent, and turned their gaze to the tranquil and impassive leadership of Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, who sat there like the corpse he was, loftily transcending this unseemly spectacle.

"Gornikov!" Marshal Borodin finally said. "It would seem we must consult Comrade Bulgorny on this matter. Boot him up, and load his decision-making program at once!"

Shaking, Ivan set to work at the control computer. "Be a good boy now, Pyotr Ivanovich," he whispered into the Bulgorny's ear. "For the sake of Mother Russia, and Ivan Igorovich's ass."

"It was *your* idea, Margot," the President complained. "I didn't want to make any speech, I just wanted to fly to Hollywood and boff me some movie stars!"

Air Force One had arrived at Burbank Airport without any Secret Service or FBI showing up, and it seemed they could have gotten Uncle Sam Carruthers to NBC's Burbank studios and on the air without being intercepted, as per the original plan.

But now neither the Vice President nor the First Lady could contemplate with any equanimity the notion of putting the President on the air with the command phone in his hand and the strategic forces gone to Condition Black. If Sam started raving about annihilating the Godless Rooshians or taking vengeance against the price-cutting Japs or even ridding Washington DC of grafting pansy bureaucrats while the red phone was on, the Air Force would bloody well do it, and no one could get through to stop them.

And Samuel T. Carruthers kept stroking the damn thing and wouldn't let Margot take it away from him.

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"It's too dangerous, Sam," she told him. "Once they know you've escaped and know where you are, they'll cut you off the air and send in the FBI and Secret Service."

"I got to admit the little lady's right, Mr. President," said Captain Bo Bob Beauregard. "You better stay right here on good old Air Force One where the Communists with the butterfly nets can't get at you." His eyes lit up. "In fact, just to be on the safe side, why don't I just get on the horn and get us some air cover? I reckon a couple dozen F-25s from Edwards would be enough to show the flag."

"I'm getting tired of sitting around on my ass in this airplane!" the President shouted angrily. "I want to go out and have some fun!"

"We could always nuke Washington," Bo Bob suggested helpfully. "The American people would understand. We had to destroy the city to save it from the Communist Conspiracy."

"It's full of nothing but pointy-headed bureaucrats, foreigners, and welfare chiselers who voted against me, isn't it?" the President said thoughtfully.

"You could say it's not a part of the real red-blooded US of A at all. . . ." agreed Captain Beauregard. "I'd recommend four low level airbursts with 5-megaton Widowmaker airborne IRBNs coming in on the deck from B-7 Penetrator hypersonic bombers. That should take out the White House Staff, wherever the slimy sons of bitches are hiding, six if you want to go for a little overkill. . . ."

"I'll show those ingrates what happens when they take away my nookie!" the President said, holding the red phone to his mouth.

"Wait, wait!" shrieked Fast Eddie. "I've got a better idea!"

"A better idea?" said Bo Bob. "Maybe you're right, boy! Now *New York City* is someplace a lot of people have always wanted to see sawed off from the rest of the country. . . ."

"No, no, no," said Fast Eddie off the top of his head. "Why don't you just call them up and make them surrender?"

"*Surrender?*"

"Give it a try before you start World War III over this jive, mon! Let them know you've busted out of the bin, and tell them you'll go on the tube and whip up a lynch-mob if they give you any more shit."

At which point, the White House staff would have no choice but to finally turn over the presidency to *him* in return for keeping their jobs, and he'd take considerable pleasure in punching out this crazy old honkie and getting hold of the phone to the button room himself.

"He's right, Sam, the sniveling cowards will give up without a fight," Margot Carruthers said, fondling him. Or anyway, she thought, they'll play along long enough for me to get you into the sack and away from the red phone.

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"Aw shit," said Captain Bo Bob Beauregard, "we're not gonna get to take out Washington?"

"I guess I would enjoy telling the bastards what I think of them first," the President decided.

"Don't look so sad, Bo Bob," said the First Lady. "You can still go play with your fighter-planes!"

"They say I am mad, but I am not mad," Hassan al Korami cackled to himself. He took another great hit from his hookah, and beamed happily across the throne room at his assembled officers and ministers, sprawled on the cushions before him, or standing at attention sucking on their spliffs.

Everything was falling into place exactly as his divine inspiration had foretold. The American President was locked in a padded cell masturbating, unbeknownst to the Israelis, who believed the Americans would protect them from the wrath of the Scourge of the Infidel. By now the Russian Computer Underground which he had created for just this purpose had blown electronic hashish into the computer that controlled the Russian corpse.

Now he was ready to kick over the anthill and watch the Satanic vermin scramble and stagger to their doom.

"Vizier," he commanded, "order the evacuation of Koramibad, for now will we disappear into the clean desert sands from whence we came!

"General, hitch up our Sword of Hassan cruise missiles to the palace Rolls Royces!" he commanded.

"Scribe, release this pronouncement to the international news media! We have evacutated Koramibad, and disappeared into the desert with our missiles where no Israeli aircraft can find us before we launch. I, the Scourge of the Infidel, now therefore issue a new non-negotiable ultimatum. The Zionist oppressors now have three days to evacuate their population to New York and Miami entirely, or we shall vaporize them all where they stand!"

Even in the court of Hassan al Korami, this pronunciamento was the cause for some concern, though of course no one present dared declare anything less than perfect comprehension of the Wisdom of the Lion of the Desert for fear of facing the Sacred Wrath of same. But no amount of hash could convince any of them that the Israelis would ever accede to such a demand.

Including Hassan al Korami.

It had all come to him in a vision last night.

Of course the Zionists would never give up without a fight to the death! They might be Infidels, but they were no wimpish cowards! Instead, they would do what he was forcing them to do, openly brandish their own

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nuclear missiles, the Slings of David, and threaten to use them first on Koram.

And then, ah then, the Russian bear would find itself twitching and stumbling out of control onto the stage!

"The frigging Israelis have gone and done it!" the National Security Adviser said as he came back from the can to the Cabinet room still zipping up his pants.

"Oh no!"

"Done what?"

"Whipped it out!"

"Whipped out what? You don't mean—"

"Their frigging nuclear strike force, that's what! They're displaying their Slings of David mobile ICBMs on television, and they say they'll take out Hassan's missiles if he doesn't surrender in 24 hours by the simple expedient of turning all of Koram into a two-kilometer-deep radioactive crater."

"That's nothing we can't manage, is it?" said the Press Secretary. "I mean, image-wise, it's not our problem, is it?"

The Cabinet meeting room, like the White House Staff, had certainly seen better days. Ever since Hassan al Korami had trotted out his cruise missiles, they had been holed up in here, holding themselves incommunicado from the press, who wanted to ask them questions they couldn't answer, from the Pentagon seeking orders they didn't know how to give, and from the Cabinet members and Congressional bigwigs demanding to see a President, who on the one hand was crazy, and who on the other, would now seem to have escaped.

So there was nothing for it but to live on take-in junk food and attempt to manage the situation, which, like the piles of old pizza cartons, chicken bones, and half-eaten greaseburgers which littered the big long table, was beginning to get over-ripe.

"It isn't fair!" declared the Chief of Staff. "Isn't this what we hire ourselves a President for, to make the decisions that can only come out wrong, and then take the blame? We're here to take care of business, not run this mess ourselves!"

Ivan Igorovich Gornikov was sweating like a pig, and he would have given half a year's wages for a single hit of hash. He was getting the shakes, if not from withdrawal, then certainly from what these vodka-sotted assholes were putting him through.

Every time he thought he had finally gotten the last update entered, some other little apparatchnik would appear with another disaster report on the rapidly deteriorating situation, and he would have to sit around

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and listen to them discuss it drunkenly for an hour and then enter a new round of decision input yet again.

He was almost tempted to tell them that it didn't matter, that Pyotr Ivanovich's software had been quite thoroughly randomized, so that additional data would only introduce additional noise into the system. But at least for the moment even the present situation was preferable to a log cabin in deepest Siberia or a bullet in the back of the head.

Which no doubt would come soon enough anyway, once the stuffed and wired mummy of Pyotr Ivanovich was ordered to speak.

"Broadcast my words to all the world!" declared Hassan al Korami. "Let the Zionist dogs piss unmanfully in their trousers!"

"You're not putting me on?" said the voice over his car radio. "This is really *the* Hassan al Korami, Lion of the Desert, Scourge of the Infidel, and you're *really* listening to K-RAB, the Rockin' Voice of the A-rabs, well *too far out*, tell all our mamas and poppas out there in the mystic sands, if you don't mind, Hassan, you wild and crazy guy, what's your fave rave of the month?"

"*Jihad Jump* by Abou Abou and the Hashishins," the Scourge of the Infidel found himself saying into his phone, which was only natural, since he owned the group that had made the charts with the heavy metal version of the Korami National Anthem.

"But I did not call to do record promos!" the Lion of the Desert roared when he caught up on what had happened. "I have a proclamation that will shake the world and set the flag of Islam flying over Jerusalem! Hear, oh—"

"Hold on to your hookah, Hassan, we'll be right back to freak out on your Sacred Rage after this word from Harada, maker of fine samurai swords since before old Omar made his first tent, boys and girls!"

And the Scourge of the Infidel was constrained to wait through the commercial.

But for once, he found to his own surprise that he did not at all mind this pause between contemplation and act. For for the first time in his life, he was actually feeling mellow.

The moment was perfect, and perfect too was the fact that he was passing through it out here in the endless desert sands, free under the sun and the sky, wandering the wastes once more, in the manner of his ancestors, though of course, as befitted the Lion of the Desert, he had much the best of it, riding in the capacious airconditioned cabin of his outsized Rolls, rather than humping about and broiling on the back of some camel. And now—

"And now, Radio K-RAB, the Rockin' Voice of the A-rabs brings you a special treat, you spaced-out Shiites and Sunnis, you, live, direct from

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the ass-end of nowhere, that heavy rapper that's got 'em all rockin' and rollin' in the aisles in Moscow and Washington this week, a K-RAB exclusive preview, you heard it here first, boys and girls, the latest unconditional ultimatum from the Scourge of the Infidel, *Hassan al Korami!*"

"Hear the words of Hassan al Korami, Zionist vermin," Hassan began mildly. "For behold, your futile threats to destroy our Sword of Hassan cruise missiles with your Satanic Slings of David are as the fartings of camels! My Hashishins and I have vanished into the desert with our nukes from whence we will annihilate you! Fire your missiles at Koram, villainous kikes, as you will, for I defy you!"

He paused, smiled to himself, and went on more calmly. "But before you do, know this, Oh Israeli, know this, American running dogs of Zionist imperialism, I have just received iron-clad assurance from the Soviet Union," he lied, "that the moment a single nuclear explosion pollutes the sacred soil of Koram, the Soviet Union will launch an all-out nuclear attack on the United States."

"Well, *far out*, I'm sure we'll all be tuning in to see whether the world is going to hear the Big Bang before the weekend, and so while we're waiting, let's all get in the proper thermonuclear mood with *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, that golden radioactive oldie from The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. . . ."

Hassan al Korami turned off the radio, and sucked at his hookah, giggling to himself. Left to their own devices, the Americans would no doubt pressure the Israelis into at least surrendering Jerusalem and the West Bank now, while the Russians would be falling all over themselves to deny that they had ever promised Koram such a thing.

But of course Hassan had not left the twin limbs of Satan to their own devices! The American President had been turned into a raving maniac by the Mendocino Liberation Front, and the computer that controlled the Russian Chairman had been confounded to Babel by the Russian Computer Underground.

Between them, an insane American President and a dead Russian Chairman animated by a thoroughly barbled computer would surely contrive a way to blow each other and the Israelis to bits.

If the Americans did not pre-empt the Russians, the Russians would pre-empt the Americans' pre-emption, or the Israelis would pre-empt him, forcing the Russians and the Americans to simultaneously pre-empt each other.

It hardly mattered which Limb of Satan pressed the panic button first. Russian missiles would annihilate Israel and America, and American missiles would annihilate Russia, and then would the Lion of the Desert

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declare Jihad and victory at the same time, and march into Jerusalem as the Imam of all Arabia and the Sultan of what was left of the world.

Admittedly, it was quite likely that in the process, Koram could expect to take some hits, but that was a price that the Scourge of the Infidel was quite willing to pay. For what was there in Koram to be destroyed but an empty city and some scattered tribes of Bedouins? No amount of megatonnage could take out the true font of his power, the bottomless pool of oil upon which his sheikdom and his transcendent destiny stood. Indeed, with most of the world in radioactive ruins, he could up the price of petroleum to anything he chose!

Marshal Borodin read the latest communique that had been handed to him and fainted dead away. The Foreign Minister set to reviving him by pouring the remains of a bottle of vodka over his head and slapping his cheeks, while Sergei Polikov retrieved the communique, scanned it, went pale, and drank straight from the mouth of another bottle before summarizing it to those of the Central Committee who were still conscious.

"Hassan al Korami has announced that the Soviet Union will react to any nuclear attack by the Israelis on his territory by an all-out preemptive attack on the United States. Furthermore, we have promised him we will do this even if he launches a nuclear attack on Israel first! Which he would seem to have every intention of doing!"

"Sergei, you imbecile, how could you promise him such a thing?" demanded the Foreign Minister.

"*Me?*" said the KGB Director. "I never promised him any such thing. It must have been the Red Army."

Marshal Borodin, by now, had revived sufficiently to declare his indignation. "How dare you accuse the Red Army of such stupidity!" he roared. "*You* are the one who sells the maniac his hashish, Sergei Polikov!"

All eyes turned on the Foreign Minister.

"Don't be ridiculous," that worthy said. "Everyone knows I'm just a technician."

"What will we do?" wailed Marshal Borodin. "If we launch our missiles at the Americans, they will launch their missiles at us, and the truth of the matter is that we both have more than enough to annihilate each other."

"But even if we *don't* launch our missiles when Israel responds to Koram's first strike, the Americans will still think we might, and then *they'd* launch first," pointed out Polikov.

"We must announce that Hassan is lying," said the Foreign Minister.

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"We must inform the Americans publicly that we will not attack them no matter what Koram and Israel do to each other."

"Will they believe us?"

"Can we believe them if they say they believe us?"

"But if we let the Israelis get away with nuking Koram, it will turn all the Arabs against us, destroy our credibility in Eastern Europe and cause a mass uprising, and leave the Middle East in the hands of a new nuclear power we have spent the past half century supporting terrorists against!"

"Perhaps we should strike pre-emptively at the Israelis?"

"Better to destroy that double-dealing parasite Hassan! Someone must get on the hot line to the American President," said the Foreign Minister.

"Who?" sneered Marshal Borodin. "Certainly not you!"

"The Red Army certainly cannot expect to negotiate directly with a head of state!"

"Comrades," said Sergei Polikov, "it is quite clear that both protocol and the fact that we will never agree on what to propose to the Americans ourselves requires that Pyotr Ivanovich, our beloved Chairman and official Chief of State be the one to deal directly with his American counterpart on a summit level."

Ivan Igorovich Gornikov could all but smell the alcoholic sighs of relief as even now at the ultimate hour of impending Armageddon, they gratefully relinquinished their responsibilities as the living representatives of the Soviet People to the animating software of a corpse.

"Activate Pyotr Ivanovich immediately, Gornikov," Marshal Borodin ordered.

"Da, tovarish," said Ivan, sending the first jolts of current to the steel exoskeleton concealed within the voluminous folds of the Bulgorny's traditional ill-fitting blue suit. Pyotr Ivanovich began to jerk and jiggle, his eyelids flapped open and closed asynchronously, his lips began to mutter to themselves, as the audioanimatronics warmed up.

Then the software took complete control, and Ivan brought the Chairman to his feet, looming above the Central Committee in all his ponderous bulk, staring out at them unwaveringly through his glass eyes, dominating them utterly with his implacable and tireless visage.

Even if his software *is* randomized, even if he *has* been dead for ten years, Ivan suddenly perceived, Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny certainly cut a better figure of a man than any of this besotted collection of generals, Stalinist thugs, and time-serving Party hacks! Ironically enough, he thought, the anti-party elements, the Central Committee, and myself now all find ourselves in perfect agreement.

The only good Party Chairman is a dead one.

* * *

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"This is the President of the United States, you effete Eastern communist assholes, and I'm really pissed off!" roared the voice on the speaker-phone, and a great moan of woe went up in the untidy smoke-filled Cabinet room.

"It's Uncle Sam all right, we checked it out," said the National Security Adviser. "He's speaking from Air Force One, which for some reason is parked at the Burbank airport, and there's a squadron of F-25s overhead putting on a display of supersonic aerobatics that's shattering every window from Pasadena to Pacoima."

"You bastards had no right to lock me up without any nookie!" bellowed Samuel T. Carruthers. "I'm horny as a billygoat and mad as an ayatollah, and I'm *the President of the United States*, and from now on, I'm in charge here."

"Get the Secret Service out there! Get the FBI! Get a SWAT team from Los Angeles! Someone's got to get a net over the son of a bitch before the press gets wind of this!"

"Now you listen here, you miserable flunkies, I want your resignations right now, or I'm going on the air, and by the time I've finished telling the American people how you kidnapped their President, held him prisoner, and tortured him with a case of the blue balls, you'll all be breaking rocks in Leavenworth!"

"Oh my god . . ." moaned the Press Secretary, dropping a phone like a dead fish, and holding his head in his hands. "The Russians have threatened to nuke us if the Israelis attack Koram!"

"What'll we do?"

"We'd better put our strategic forces on Red Alert," said the National Security Adviser. And he picked up the phone to the button room.

"And don't try to send your goons after me, either!" said the President. "My air cover will blow them away. And if you give me any crap, I'll let Bo Bob nuke Washington."

"Holy shit!" shouted the National Security Adviser, dropping his phone like a hot potato. "They've already gone to Condition Black!"

"Condition Black? What the hell is *Condition Black*?"

"The button room is sealed off and running on internal air and power. All I can get on the phone from here is a robot voice telling me the number is temporarily out of service. There's only one active line in now, and that's the red phone on Air Force One."

"That raving maniac has personal control of our nuclear forces?"

"You got it! The lunatic has taken over the asylum!"

Ivan Igorovich held the Party Chairman at stiff attention while he keyed in the final update, exactly as he did on May Day and the Anniversary of the Revolution, when Pyotr Ivanovich stood heroically im-

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perturbable for long hours in the dank breezes atop Lenin's tomb. At least the exoskeleton controls would seem not to have been affected by the Joker program.

But now it was time to run the thoroughly barbled decision-making software, and when he turned matters over to *that*, it would be terra incognita, for even stoned-out hacker's theory could not agree on what would happen when a randomized decision-making process interfaced with a scrambled data bank. Boris believed that feedback loops might be set up that would short the whole mess out. Tanya opined that the process of dialectical materialism itself might speak through this tossing of the electronic coins of a cybernated *I Ching*. Grishka likened it to feeding the entire Soviet Encyclopedia through a tree-chipper and publishing what came out as the next edition of *Pravda*.

Ivan Igorovich Gornikov had no such theories, but now he was the one who was about to find out, as he booted up the program.

Pyotr Ivanovich stood there silently and motionlessly for a while, and then the lips of the corpse began to tremble, and the glass eyes began to flick back and forth in their sockets, and then the Chairman began to speak in a multi-tonal syntax cobbled together out of words and phrases from the recorded library of his old speeches.

"Fraternal Greetings, peasants and workers of the Magnetogorsk refrigerator works, and welcome to the Five-Year Plan of Socialist Realism. . . ."

"What?"

"Gornikov! What's wrong with the Chairman?" demanded Marshal Borodin.

Ivan shrugged innocently. "Aside from the fact that he's been dead for ten years, nothing."

"The correct Marxist-Leninist solution to the present crisis in hooliganism is to express fraternal solidarity with the long-range class self-interest of the running dogs of agricultural production quotas. . . ."

"Then why is he babbling like that?" snapped Sergei Polikov.

"Babbling?" said Ivan. "Don't tell me an educated Marxist-Leninist intellectual like yourself has trouble following our Chairman's new Party line when it seems so crystal clear to an ignorant but ideologically pure Soviet worker like me?"

"We must stamp out revanchist elements within the Kirov Ballet and send the New Soviet Man to conquer the stars on his way to Siberia. . . ."

"We can't put *that* on the hot line to the American President!" said the Foreign Minister.

"What else can we do?"

Marshal Borodin scanned another communique. "Spy satellites indicate that the Americans have gone to Condition Black!" he moaned.

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"Everything they have is now directly controlled by this used-car salesman, this bumbling *civilian*, this Uncle Sam Carruthers!"

"They're preparing a first strike!" said Polikov. "We must launch everything we have at once!"

"But maybe the President has instead seized control from the militarist circles in order to *prevent* some crazy general from acting on his own. Have you never seen *Dr. Strangelove*?"

"He's right!" said the Minister of Production, arising from his stupor. "It's an implied invitation to a summit."

On and on they went, as the clocked ticked and the Bulgorny babbled, and finally Ivan Igorovich Gornikov could contain himself no longer. What did he have to lose by speaking, since if the world were not blown to smithereens shortly, he would be shot for treason if the KGB still existed afterward to find out what had happened?

"You'll pardon my saying so, comrades," he ventured, "but why don't you ask *Pyotr Ivanovich* if he feels like talking to the American President before we all blow ourselves to bits? He may be dead, but at least he can always be counted upon to be decisive."

"Well what about it, Pyotr Ivanovich?" Marshal Borodin demanded directly of the stuffed and wired Party Chairman. "Do you wish to negotiate with the American President?"

". . . the Soviet Union is in favor of peaceful coexistence with the complete disarmament of all neo-colonialist tractor-operators. . . ."

"*That* should give the American President pause," mused Polikov.

"Let no one mistake our determination to fulfill our sorghum production quotas or take a capitalist road towards the dictatorship of the party hacks, for we will never submit to American demands that we make a profit-motive revolution without breaking eggs. . . ."

"A powerful dialectical line would seem to be emerging, wouldn't you say?" said the Minister of Production.

"I find it impossible to fault its logic," agreed Sergei Polikov.

"It would appear you are our only hope, Pyotr Ivanovich," said Marshal Borodin. "Will you now speak with the American President?"

Ivan caused the corpse of the Chairman to nod its assent, and managed to smear a rictus grin across its face. "We have nothing to fear but bourgeois tendencies in American ruling class circles," said Pyotr Ivanovich confidently as the exoskeleton made his dead hand reach for the hot-line phone.

"Jesus," said the Appointments Secretary, "that's the Russian Chairman himself on the hot-line!"

"But he's *dead!*"

"He may be dead, but he's on the line demanding to talk with the President himself, and threatening to launch an all-out preemptive ide-

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ological dialectic against the class self-interest of malingerers and black-marketeers, whatever that means, if we refuse."

"What the hell can we do now?"

"Well, you assholes, I'm getting tired of waiting for your answer," the voice of Samuel T. Carruthers shrieked on the speakerphone. "I'm horny, and I'm bored, and I want to go out and get some nookie!"

The White House Staff exchanged terrified speculative glances.

"We can't!"

"Got any better ideas?"

"Isn't this what we hired him for?"

"I'm gonna count to three, and then I'm gonna tell Bo Bob to have them drop fifty megatons on Washington. One . . . Two . . ."

"He may be crazy. . . ."

"Two and a half . . ."

"But at least he won't take shit."

"I though you were dead," President Carruthers said when they had patched Air Force One through on the hot line.

"The state will wither away only when all production quotas for sugar beets are exceeded by non-proliferation treaties between revanchist troglodytes and the vanguard of the working software," said the weird voice on the phone.

"My dong will wither away if I don't get me some nookie soon!" the President said crossly. "What do you want, you Rooshian stiff?"

"I want to take this opportunity to express my fraternal sympathies with decadent capitalist sensualism," replied Chairman Bulgorny. "Owing to temporary bad weather in the Ukraine, the nookie crop in Central Asia had been shipped to the Gulag by mistake. . . ."

"Oh," said the President much more sympathetically, "you're also having trouble getting laid."

"Socialist morality has advanced by leaps and bounds since Rasputin," Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny admitted. It figured. All those Rooshian women looked like science fiction fans as far as Uncle Sam was concerned, and besides, it must not be so easy to make out in singles bars when you're a corpse.

"What you need, buddy, is some Red White and Blue One Hundred Percent American Used Nookie!" the President told him. "I hear tell that they got hookers in Las Vegas that'll make even a dead Russian Chairman whistle the Star Spangled Banner out his asshole!"

"Cultural exchange programs between our two great peoples should not be interrupted by linkage to ideological differences between trashy western popular literature and the Red Army Chorus."

"Tell you what, Mr. Chariman, why don't we have a meeting in the

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grand old American tradition?" the President suggested helpfully. "We'll go to Las Vegas and party with some hookers, and who knows, once we've gotten stewed, screwed, and tattooed, we might even get down to doing some business."

"Long live the solidarity between progressive elements of social parasitism and to each according to his need," agreed the stuffed Soviet leader. "Let us conduct joint docking maneuvers together in the spirit of Apollo-Soyuz while continuing peaceful competition for the available natural resources."

"See you in Vegas," the President said happily. "For a Rooshian and a corpse, you sure sound like a real party animal!"

Blinking against the cruel glare, Ivan Igorovich Gornikov maneuvered the Party Chairman down the ramp onto the broiling tarmac of McCarran Airport, following as inconspicuously as he could while of necessity lugging the portable control console.

"Two hours of this heat, and poor Pyotr Ivanovich will start to stink," Boris Vladimirov whispered unhappily in Ivan's ear as the full force of the noonday Las Vegas sun hit them in the face like a hot rocket exhaust.

Ivan groaned. No one had had time to think of that.

No one had really had time to think of anything. The hardware arrangements were as hastily improvised as the summit meeting that the Chairman had somehow managed to arrange with the American President. Access to the main memory banks and mainframe software of Pyotr Ivanovich back in Moscow was a shaky affair involving a satellite link to the airplane, and a modem-mobile-phone link to the control console that Ivan carried, cleverly disguised as what the decadent capitalists called a "ghetto blaster." It even had AM-FM cassette capability for the sake of realism.

But the KGB technicians, who admittedly had done heroic feats of socialist labor putting the electronic linkages together on such short notice, had entirely overlooked the limitations of even advanced socialist embalming technology. True, the corpse of the Chairman had survived ten years of service without beginning to rot, but a few short appearances atop Lenin's tomb in brisk Moscow springs and falls were one thing, and the 100-degree heat of the great American desert quite another!

Ivan, Boris, and the Chairman were met at the foot of the ramp by the vice president, the First Lady, and a big blond Air Force Captain.

"Welcome to the monkey house, mon!" said the Vice President.

"You look pale as as a pissant parson, boy," said the Air Force Captain, regarding the Chairman with an idiot grin. "Guess it's pretty hard to keep a tan back in Moscow!"

"I am pleased to convey the fraternal dialectic of the workers and

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peasants of the Lubianka collective gulag to the militaristic elements of progressive world youth," said Pyotr Ivanovich, grinning mechanically of its own accord, as it had been taking to doing lately.

"Say what?"

"The Chairman's English is somewhat less than perfect," Ivan said hastily. "Would you prefer we switch to Russian?"

"So you can do the talking?"

"Who *me*?" exclaimed Ivan. "I'm just the Chairman's . . . how do you say it, *roadie*," Ivan said. "And Boris here is my assistant."

"Where's the Foreign Minister and the Defense Minister and your KGB chief?" demanded the American Vice President.

Cowering with the rest of the Central Committee in the Dacha where they hope to save at least their own cowardly asses when the bombs start to fall! Ivan almost answered. Not one of them dared accompany the dead but gallant Party Chairman on his eleventh-hour mission to save the world from nuclear destruction; the randomized decision-making software was not only in control, it was entirely on its own. Even Marshal Borodin, after a fatuous charade of reluctance, had readily enough in the end ceded direct computer-link control of the Soviet strategic forces to the decision-making software of Pyotr Ivanovich. Collective Leadership had been entirely surrendered to a new Cult of Personality.

"Our Glorious Chairman, Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, Hero of Socialist Labor, inheritor of the mantle of Marx and Lenin, has the full unquestioned support of the KGB, the Red Army, and the Party machinery which he embodies," Ivan was therefore able to declare quite truthfully. "But if there has been no militarist coup in American ruling circles, why is your President not here to greet him?"

The Vice President and the First Lady exchanged peculiar glances.

"Sam has . . . got his hands full at the Court of Caligula," the First Lady finally muttered, grinding her teeth.

"The Court of Caligula??"

"The hotel where the summit will be held," said the Vice President.

"Don't worry boys," boomed the Air Force Captain, "it's got the wildest casino floor on the Strip. You're gonna love it!"

"Time to go down to meet the Rooshians, girls!" the President said, pulling up the pants of his Uncle Sam suit but forgetting to zip up the fly. If he had not yet gotten stewed or tatooed, he had certainly at last gotten quite properly screwed while Margot was occupied at the airport. He wondered if boffing four hookers in two hours might be one for the Guiness Book of Records.

"I hope your Rooshian friends don't think they can pay in rubles!" said the blonde bimbo.

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"Yeah, Mr. Prez," said the brunette, "I mean the world may be about to blow itself up, but business is business!"

"Don't worry girls, you just show old Pyotr Ivanovich a good time, and send the bill to the State Department," said the President.

The Air Force helicopter set down in the outdoor parking lot of the Caligula's Court Hotel and Casino, a huge gleaming glass phallus looming behind a half-scale replica of the Roman Coliseum domed like an all-weather stadium.

Igor, Boris, Chairman Bulgorny, and the Americans were met at the colonnaded entrance by a phalanx of body-builders done up as Praetorian Guards, replete with spears, shields, and skin-tight rubber body-armor.

They were ushered down a short, wide corridor embellished with audioanimatrated Romans and animals cycling through entirely un-Disneylike couplings and through a great vaulted archway overlooking the casino floor.

A long spiral ramp wound down around the circumference of the huge room where the grandstands in the real thing would have been, a continuous arcade of slot-machines, where fat blue-haired women squeezed into pastel tights, small children, gum-chewing off-duty hookers, and bleary-eyed drunks stood pulling levers mechanically and staring into space.

Below, the roulette wheels, blackjack and poker games, and craps tables were interspersed with both live sex acts and audioanimatronic figures performing hideous tortures and perversions too beastly to contemplate. The cocktail waitresses wore black leather panty-hose, chrome chains, and slave-collars. The dealers and croupiers were done up in rags as captive Christians, and the lurking bouncers were gladiators.

A big stage jutting out from the curving wall was presently dressed as the Emperor's Box, complete with two cushioned thrones, couches, fan-waving Nubians naked to the waist, groaning tables heaped with fruit and meats, and a plethora of nude serving girls.

The cocktail tables in front of the stage had been entirely taken over by reporters, cameramen, and TV technicians in the process of getting stony drunk, and the stage itself was garishly lit by bright shooting lights.

On one of the oversized thrones lolled Samuel T. Carruthers, the President of the United States. He was dressed in an Uncle Sam suit. Four hookers in red, white, and blue garter-belts and pasties managed to drape themselves over various portions of his anatomy. He sat there stroking the red phone to the button room with his fly open.

"Somehow, Ivan," Boris said as they made their way across the casino floor towards the presidential spectacle, "I don't think we're in Kansas."

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"Sam Carruthers, how dare you!" Margot shouted before any more official greetings could be exchanged. "Get rid of these bimbos at once!"

"This is my new White House Staff!" the President said. "Candy is the Press Secretary, Lurleen is National Security Adviser, Marla is Chief of Staff, and Sue Ellen is my new expert in Domestic Affairs."

"You can't appoint a bunch of whores to be the White House staff!" exclaimed the Vice President.

"Why not?" said the President. "Why should I be any different than my illustrious predecessors?"

Fast Eddie shrugged. For once he had to admit that the old goat had a point.

"Well if that's the White House staff, then Bo Bob here is going to be my Appointments Secretary for the duration," the First Lady declared. "Come on, Bo Bob, you sit down here with me and peel me a grape."

"Well, come on and get your ass up here, Pete!" the President told Pyotr Ivanovich after the American delegation had sorted out its seating protocol, patting the cushion of the adjoining throne. "These lovely ladies are ready for some stiff negotiation."

Ivan hesitated, holding the Bulgorny motionless, for he wouldn't give Pyotr Ivanovich more than an hour or two under those hot lights.

But Pyotr Ivanovich, it would seem, had developed some more ideas of his own, or perhaps the linkage with Moscow was not quite as static-free as promised with all these slot machines going off around the control console, for without any say-so on Ivan's part, the Bulgorny ascended to the stage and seated itself. Two of the prostitutes detached themselves from the President of the United States and turned their ministrations to the corpus of the Chairman of the Soviet Communist Party.

"Greetings to the Plenary Session of the Supreme Soviet of the decadent West," said the Chairman. "I wish to take this opportunity to propose a new five-year plan for drill press production."

Ivan and Boris collapsed behind a cocktail table and ordered a bottle of vodka, determined under these conditions to catch up to the American TV people, which, by the looks of them, would take some doing.

"Haw, haw! That's a good one!" the President exclaimed, slapping the Chairman on the back. "Well, you've come to the right town to do it!"

"Mr. Chairman!"

"Mr. President!"

The cameras started rolling and the reporters were up and shouting, and all at once a press conference had begun.

"Mr. Chairman! Is it true that you're dead?"

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"The Cult of Personality has been tossed in the dustbin of history and the Party machinery now functions as the Collective Leadership of the Brezhnev Doctrine."

"Mr. President, if the Israelis ignore the Korami ultimatum, and Koram defies the Israeli counterultimatum, how will you respond to the Soviet threat to launch a nuclear attack on the United States after the Israelis reply to the Korami response to their rejection of the original demands?"

"Huh?" said Samuel T. Carruthers. What was the flannel-mouthed sucker talking about? He turned to his National Security Adviser. "Lurleen," he whispered, "what you got to say about that?"

"Tell 'em you'll think about it, hon."

"I'll just have to think about it."

"But Mr. President, within 24 hours, Hassan al Korami will launch his nuclear missiles at Israel if they don't capitulate, and if the Israelis retaliate, the Russians will nuke the United States! Isn't that what this summit meeting is all about?"

"They will? It is?" the President said perplexedly. He turned to face the Chairman of the Central Committee, who sat beside him maintaining a perfect poker-face despite this awful revelation. "I thought you just came here to get some nookie, Pete!" he complained.

"Mr. Chairman, do you deny that the Soviet Union has threatened to launch an all out nuclear attack on the United States if the Israelis attack the Sheikdom of Koram?"

"The peace-loving Soviet People will never be the first to use nuclear weapons nor will we be the last. Long live the threat of long-range economic planning and mutual short-arm inspection between our two great nations!"

"Does that mean that Hassan al Korami was *lying* then? Are you now willing to promise the American people that Koram is *not* under the Soviet nuclear umbrella?"

"Owing to technical difficulties with the Proton supply rocket, the entire production of the Kiev umbrella factory was mislabled as fertilizer and shipped to Poland in place of the missing consignment of Marxist-Leninist dialectic. The Ministry of Production assumes no responsibility for the ideological reliability of misuse of the product."

"Just a minute now, let's get one thing straight, I'm the President here, this is *my* party!" said the President. This was getting out of hand. This smart-ass Rooshian was doin' all the talking.

"You tell 'em, Mr. Prez," said the presidential Press Secretary, nibbling at his ear.

"That's right!" said Uncle Sam. "Why don't you guys start asking *me* some questions?"

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"Well then what will *you* do? Will you force the Israelis to capitulate to Koram? Will you pre-empt the Russians? Will you attack Koram before the deadline?"

Uncle Sam's patience was wearing quite thin. Koram, Israel, the frigging Rooshians, they were all a bunch of foreign troublemakers, weren't they? "I'll nuke 'em till they glow blue!" he shouted, waving the red command phone.

"Russia?"

"Koram?"

"Israel?"

"Nuke who?"

"Nuke *you*, Charlie!" the President said crossly. "That's the part I haven't figured out yet!"

Slowly, the tumult began to subside, as the three major network anchormen rose to their feet in unison, and with the cameras rolling, went after the President before the world like a tag-team of wrestlers.

"Mr. President, within 24 hours, World War III is likely to break out between the Soviet Union and the United States unless you and the Chairman can agree on steps to prevent it. . . ."

"The clock is ticking towards midnight. . . ."

"And there you sit before the American people with your fly open and the button in your hand telling us you'll think about it?"

"The American people have a right to know what you're going to do right now!"

"What am I going to do right now?" the President asked his Chief of Staff. She grabbed his crotch as she whispered in his ear.

The President grinned happily. "Right now," he said, "we're going to party!"

"Boy, Mr. Prez, your friend is really weird," said the Presidential Press Secretary, emerging from the adjoining bedroom on wobbly knees, and plunking herself down on the bed between the National Security Adviser and the Chief of Staff, who lay there torpidly dragging on cigarettes. "He's already worn three of us out, and we *still* can't make him quit!"

"And he talks so funny all the time while he's doing it, like some kind of speed freak phonograph record whose needle keeps slipping."

"He's a Rooshian, isn't he?" said Uncle Sam who, now quite thoroughly sated, was making an effort to pull up his pants and be Presidential.

The Domestic Affairs Adviser emerged from the other bedroom suddenly, ghostly pale and green around the gills. "Give me a lude quick!" she moaned. "You're not going to believe this! It fell off!"

"You don't mean—"

"I am proud to award you all the order of Hero of Socialist Labor for

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your stakhanovite efforts in overfulfilling your production quotas by 23 percent!" declared Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, clad only in his baggy blue boxer shorts and suit jacket.

As he regarded the Soviet Chairman, standing there, grinning hideously, and yammering gibberish, Sam Carruthers remembered what in his severe horniness he had forgotten, namely that Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny was in fact dead.

Now he finally noticed the green cast to the Soviet leader's skin, and once having observed that, he began to smell the faint putrid odor of deer that had been hung just a wee bit too long.

Well, dead or not, thought Uncle Sam Carruthers, he can't complain I didn't show him a good time. And dead or not, he realized, Bulgorny was a man to be reckoned with, because dead or not, he had run the show over there in Russia for twenty years.

"Fair's fair, Pete," he said. "We've had our partying, and now, in the grand old American tradition, it's time sit down to talk turkey. We can't let this little A-rab pissant pull this stuff on us! We gotta figure something out. Lurleen, give me my National Security Briefing."

"Say what, Mr. Prez?"

"Tell me what the hell is going on!"

"Well, hon," said the National Security Adviser, as they all repaired to the couches in the suite's sitting room, "it's the same dumb game we girls get you johns to play with each other when we're feelin' mean. You know, some girl will get two big bruisers pissed off at each other, and then stand back and laugh while they punch each other out. Well, you and old Pete are the two nuclear heavyweight champs of the world, right, and this Hassan al Korami is the mean little bitch."

"That's right," said the Domestic Affairs Adviser, "you jerks are letting him make monkeys out of you."

"Oh yeah?" said the President. "If you girls are so smart and Pete and I are so dumb, what would *you* do?"

The Presidential Press Secretary eased herself down in between the President and the Chairman and threw an arm around each of their shoulders.

"You guys don't *really* want to punch each other out, now do you?" she purred placatingly. "You're not really mad at *each other* now that you've partied together, now are you?"

"Right," said the National Security Adviser. "It's the creep that's been trying to get you to blow each other up so he can sit back and laugh who deserves to get his ticket punched, now isn't it?"

"What do you got to say to that, Pete?" the President asked the Chairman. "Makes sense to me. Why don't we just get together and stomp the little pissant flat?"

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"Marxist-Leninist doctrine clearly states that a fool and his missiles are soon parted," agreed Pyotr Ivanovich. "But on the other hand, the long-range interests of the Soviet consumer class cannot be decoupled from the national paranoia trip of Soviet prestige. *Pravda* by definition must always speak the truth."

"He means he'll look like a wimp if he backs down," explained the Domestic Affairs Adviser.

"I guess I can see your point, Pete," the President was constrained to admit, seeing as how the poor bastard looked like a corpse already.

"Why don't you guys just go on *America Tonite* and yell at each other?" suggested the presidential Press Secretary. "Pete here, instead of threatening to punch you out if your pal Israel punches out Hassan, threatens to punch you out if *you* punch out Hassan."

"Right, hon," said the Chief of Staff, "and you can jump up and down and threaten to punch out Pete if he punches out your pal Israel."

"You both get to look like big tough guys, and your troublemaking pals can't complain you let them down."

"But instead of blowing up the world, we all just get to sit back and laugh while the smart-ass that tried to start the whole thing gets the shit beat out of him."

"You girls sure beat all hell out of my previous appointments," the President said with satisfaction. "What do you say, Pete? It's almost show time. . . ."

"Long live dialectic solidarity between the collective leadership of working class software and the social parasites of decadent Western oligarchs!" the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party declared, shaking hands with the President of the United States, and with that, the summit meeting was concluded, and the participants repaired arm in arm-in-arm to the casino floor.

America Tonite had been on the air for ten minutes, and Terry Tummler had already gone on and died with his opening monologue when the President of the United States, the Chairman of the Soviet Communist Party, and four disheveled hookers finally shambled onto the Emperor's box stage-set and flopped themselves down under the hot shooting lights.

The primo front-row tables had been permanently commandeered by the by-now thoroughly sodden world press corps, and lousy tippers these freeloaders were too, to the dismay of the waitresses. Ivan and Boris managed to keep their front row seats by offering hash joints and vodka to all and sundry, and the Vice President, the First Lady, and Captain Bo Bob Beauregard found themselves squeezed together at a small table next to the Russians.

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The rest of the night club seats were jammed with a demographic cross-section of ordinary Americans who had come to get drunk, lose their money, and tell the folks back home that they had seen *America Tonite* live in Vegas, and instead found themselves sitting through dumb jokes waiting for the heads of state to emerge from their seclusion with the agreement that would save the world from nuclear holocaust.

And now, at last, with the deadline for doomsday only hours away, what they, and the vast television audience beyond, got was a blotchy green corpse and a former used car salesman in an unzipped Uncle Sam suit, surrounded by fagged-out hookers being interviewed by Terry Tummler bulging out of a comic Roman toga.

"Well, it's a pleasure to welcome two such extinguished world leaders to *America Tonite*," said the genial Terry Tummler, "and I'm sure we'd all like to know whether your writers have come up with any better material than mine have tonight. I mean, when *I* lay a bomb, only my agent dies, but if you bomb out, the whole show gets canceled!"

"Don't get your balls in an uproar, Terry," the President said, waving the red phone. "Uncle Sam Carruthers takes no shit from Ivan the Terrible here!" He stuck his tongue out at Chairman Bulgorny and let fly a juicy Bronx cheer. "If you bomb Israel, Bluto," he told Pyotr Ivanovich with a wink, "old Popeye here will nuke Rooshia back into the stone age."

At this, even the unflappable Terry Tummler blanched, covering it as best he could with a sickly grin. "Well . . . heh . . . heh . . . I guess these are the jokes, folks," he stammered.

"What have we *done*, Boris?" Ivan Igorovich Gornikov moaned drunkenly.

They had been unable to control the Bulgorny for hours, yet somehow Pyotr Ivanovich had managed to function autonomously. The randomized software had taken over entirely. There was nothing in any hacker's theory to account for it. If he were not a good atheist, Ivan would have crossed himself.

Come to think of it, he thought, making the motions, better safe than sorry.

"What about you, Chairman Bulgorny?" Terry Tummler burbled. "Got any hot new projects?"

Some sapient spirit seemed to peer out from behind the glass eyes of the corpse of Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, which certainly was beginning to look a little worse for wear. When it spoke, Ivan wondered whether some chance conjunction between programming fragments and bits and pieces of randomized old speeches had not conjured the true spirit of the

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bureaucratic socialist state, the voice of pure dialectical determinism itself, the ghost in the Party machinery.

"The peace-loving malingerers and hooligans of the Red Army will not stand idly by while neo-colonialist war criminals in high Pentagon circles vaporize reactionary Third World criminal elements," Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny declared forcefully.

"Oh yeah?" roared the President, mugging at the audience. "So's yer mother!"

"Now, guys, come on, we've still got an hour of air time to fill, I mean, if we have World War III now, all that's left backstage to go on afterward is a chimp act and a gypsy violinist!"

"Well, I'm ready to just sit back, open a six-pack, and watch the big fight on television if he is," said the President, leaning back, throwing one arm around a hooker, and elbowing the dead Soviet Chairman in the ribs with the other.

"If our illustrious allies wish to beat the shit out of each other," agreed Pyotr Ivanovich, "then both the long-range interest of the international working class and the spirit of non-interference in the internal sporting events of friendly buffer states require that our two great peoples do nothing to interfere with their right to express their national identities outside in the alley."

"You tell 'em, Pyotr Ivanovich!" exclaimed Ivan. "Ah Boris, does not such such sterling cybernetic leadership make you proud to be a member of the Russian Computer Underground?"

"Cowards! Camel-suckers! Perfidious infidels!" roared Hassan al Korami when he heard the news bulletin on K-RAB. How dare the scorpions he had sealed together in a bottle refuse to fight each other to the death for his delectation?

"No more Sheik Nice Guy!" he screamed, storming into the control van where his missile controllers sat before their screens and joysticks ready to play *Cruise Missile Commander*.

"Launch all our missiles the moment an Israeli plane crosses our borders," said the Lion of the Desert. "But you will fire only *three* missiles at Israel. The ones we reserved for Beersheba and Eilat will instead be diverted to attack the American and Soviet fleets in the Mediterranean."

He rubbed his hands together, sucking on the nearest hookah. "Let's see the two arms of Satanic modernism talk their way out of *that* one!" he cackled maniacally, drooling smoke and spittle.

"Pyotr Ivanovich's nose has fallen off!" moaned Boris.

It was true. The Chairman was visibly beginning to decompose under the shooting lights for all the world to see. His face had turned a sickly

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brownish green and gas bubbles pocked the surface of its varnish. Now the nose had melted like a piece of overripe cheese and fallen into his lap, exposing wet white bone.

Armand Deutcher sweated nervously before his news monitors in the control room of the Rockin' Voice of the A-rabs. An ABC camera satellite was trying to focus a clear picture of a flight of objects proceeding due south across Saudi territory from Israel, on their way to Koram. At the same time, Israeli TV was broadcasting *its* satellite coverage of the Korami cruise missiles waiting on the desert sands. Meanwhile, one of the other two American networks was running an old movie, while the third dominated the ratings with *America Tonite* as never before. Radio Moscow was playing patriotic music.

Now the NBC camera zoomed in tight on the formation of Israeli aircraft. Alors, they were neither Slings of David missiles nor fighter-bombers of the Israeli Air Force, but a few dozen cheap obsolescent lightweight drones powered by lawnmower engines!

"Bedouin spotters report a vast armada of Israeli aircraft crossing our sacred borders, oh Lion of the Desert," declared Hassan al Korami's radio operator. "From horizon to horizon, the sky is black with F-21s, SuperKfirs, and supersonic cruise missiles!"

"Launch all missiles!" shrieked Hassan the Assassin, biting through the stem of his hookah in his ecstasy and spewing splinters of bloody ivory.

Hurriedly, Armand Deutcher readied his own control console, and ordered K-RAB off the air so he could patch into the Rockin' Voice of the A-rabs' monster transmitter.

For the Israelis could have only one thing in mind by sending in this handful of old junk instead of a sophisticated all-out non-nuclear attack force.

Thanks to the crazy American President and the rapidly decomposing corpse of the Soviet Chairman, his own plan was now back on course.

The Israelis obviously intended to provoke Hassan into firing his missiles first. Even now their own satellite cameras were showing the world five rusty F-111s wobbling shakily into the air, then roaring off at supersonic speed right down on the deck in the general direction of Israel.

And, even as Armand had expected, the NBC satellite camera now showed the Israeli drones self-destructing just inside Korami territory.

Wonderful! Soon the Israeli controllers would take command of the Korami cruise missiles. They'd drop four of them harmlessly into the

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ocean off camera, and then use their satellite cameras to show the fifth one veering crazily off course and taking out Mecca.

Then they could nuke Koram out of existence while even their Arab enemies applauded, and when the dust cleared, they would sit astride the entire Middle East after having shot their way into the club as a nuclear superpower.

Or so they thought.

But Armand Deutcher had much better uses to put that cruise missile to than starting a nuclear potlatch, which, if it didn't escalate into World War III, would result in a Middle Eastern Pax Judaeaica which would severely suppress arms sales for decades to come.

His multi-billion-franc smart-money bet was on a far more profitable nuclear option. . . .

A battery of monitors had been dragged out onto the stage set of *America Tonite*, and Terry Tummler, the President, the Chairman, and the hookers of the White House staff sat there watching TV on camera, including, bizarrely enough, the live coverage of themselves watching it.

"Heh . . . heh . . ." burbled Terry Tummler. "Looks as if the boys in the bedsheets have launched their missiles. . . . Got anything funny to say about that, Mr. Prez?"

"I'll lay 6 to 5 against any of them hitting Israel," said Sam Carruthers.

"You're faded, Mr. Prez," said the National Security Adviser.

"I'll lay even money them Israelis clean old Hassan's clock in the next twenty minutes," declared the Chief of Staff. "Any takers?"

"The peace loving revanchist vanguard of the Soviet People accepts your challenge to make a fast ruble," declared Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, whose stainless steel teeth and bony jaw were now clearly showing where more rotting flesh had fallen away from his face.

Israeli TV now made a great show of having its satellite cameras lose track of the wobbly F-111s as the five Korami cruise missiles peeled away from each other. On came the Israeli Prime Minister with a terse announcement.

"The Sheikdom of Koram has launched an unprovoked nuclear attack on the State of Israel. The Israeli defense forces will confine themselves to a non-nuclear counterstrike in the interests of world peace. Unless, of course, this maniac Hassan al Korami should actually manage to hit anything with his nuclear missiles, in which case, we shall naturally be forced to nuke Koram out of existence in the interests of Biblical justice."

Armand Deutcher had the Korami missiles on his radar screen now. Three of them were zigging and zagging more or less in the direction of

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Israel, but the other two were making a bee-line across the Mediterranean towards the Russian and American fleets! Good Lord, if the Israelis didn't dump those two missiles tout suite, all bets were off!

"What is happening?" demanded Hassan al Korami, chewing the soggy end of his huge spliff to bits, as his controllers twiddled furiously with their joysticks. On their monitor screens, fuzzy purple airplanes were bobbing and weaving over cartoon landscapes dotted with medieval castles, fire-breathing reptiles, and giant apes.

"We have racked up three million points already!" one of the controllers reassured him. "According to the control computers, we are approaching the arcade record!"

One by one, the blips dropped off Armand Deutcher's radar screen, as the Israeli controllers seized control of the Korami cruise missiles and ditched them into the sea. Now there was only one F-111 still on the screen, headed in the general direction of Tel Aviv. Suddenly it veered off, did a ragged one-eighty, and set off on a new tack to the south.

"Well that's four out of five into the drink, isn't it?" said Terry Tummler. "Maybe there won't be a fireworks act before the last commercial after all. . . ."

"It ain't over till the Fat Lady sings," said the President. "What do you say, Pete, will you give me three to one on at least one Big One going off before the show is over?"

But Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny sat there silently, his expression rendered all the more unreadable by the fact that most of his face had now fallen away, revealing a gleaming wet skull with two glass eyes set in its sockets, a hideous stainless steel grin, and shards and tatters of shriveled skin and decomposing flesh clinging to the bone.

The Israeli satellite cameras had now managed to "find" the errant F-111.

"The last Korami cruise missile has now been spotted over Saudi Arabia and headed in the general direction of Mecca!" declared the Israeli TV announcer with a great show of outraged horror as the rusty old plane jerked into focus buzzing low over the head of a camel caravan.

"Whatever this maniac Hassan al Korami is up to, and whatever misunderstandings may have existed between our two great peoples in the past, the Government of Israel wishes to assure our Arab friends that we will regard any Korami nuclear attack on their Holy City as an attack on our own, and will retaliate accordingly with the full resources of our nuclear arsenal in the Spirit of Camp David."

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Armand Deutcher keyed in the over-ride command, which went out over the mighty Rockin' Voice of the Arabs to the lamprey circuit he had planted on the control chips that the Israelis had secreted in the phony remote control machinery.

Reaching for his joystick, he bent the F-111's course slowly towards the west, fighting to turn the jury-rigged cruise missile around against the unexpectedly stiff resistance of the Israeli controllers.

On all the control screens, the same little purple airplane was weaving among giant black pterodactyls and laser-firing flying saucers towards a huge dim black castle at the top of the screen. Robots and centipedes poured out of it and began firing frisbees and lightning-bolts.

"A million bonus points for getting the Black Castle!" exclaimed one of the controllers.

Hassan al Korami squinted at the lettering on the screen.

Where in Israel was "Mordor?"

"Merde!" grunted Armand Deutcher, stirring sweatily at his joystick.

All three American networks now showed the F-111 stunting crazily over Mecca as Deutcher fought the Israelis for control.

It buzzed low over the bazaar, sending goods and awnings flying with its supersonic shockwave, zigged and zagged among the sunbleached buildings, suddenly shot straight up, then dropped down again and came within ten feet of taking out the Kaaba, before pulling out into another steep climb, and then—

—And then all at once Deutcher had it. He managed to bring the jury-rigged cruise missile back down on the deck and bend its course more or less to the north as its wings began to develop familiar flutter. . . .

"Son of a bitch, look at that boy *fly*!" Bo Bob Beauregard exclaimed admiringly.

More monitors had been set out in Caligula's Court for the benefit of *America Tonite's* live audience in order to hype the action, for by now even the tables and slot machines had been entirely abandoned as everyone in the casino watched the network satellite cameras track the Korami cruise missile upon whose eventual destination thousands of bets now hung.

"Wow," said the President, excitedly stroking both his red phone and himself, "this is just like the fourth quarter of the Superbowl!"

The F-111 was putting on quite a show.

Jerking and bobbing about twenty feet above the Mediterranean like a drunken dragonfly, its wings shaking and judering, the rusty old jet

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missed a supertanker by inches, buzzed a cruiseliner, decapitated a seagull, and then came in low over the crowded harbor of St. Tropez, France.

It weaved crazily among the pleasurecraft, scattering waterskiers, starlets, beachbums, and Greek shipping tycoons, headed straight for the line of yachts lining the primo beachfront property, and then suddenly managed to veer off at the last moment, east along the Cote D'Azure in the general direction of Monaco.

It wobbled along the coastline until the prime beachfront real estate was replaced by rocky cliffs falling directly to the sea and then—

—the right wing of the F-111 sheered off and went sailing away like a kite as the plane went into a steep left turn—

—it skittered crazily across the sky and smashed directly into the seacliff with a blinding flash—

And the satellite cameras pulled back to a medium shot of a mushroom pillar cloud blossoming evilly on the southern coast of France.

A great groan of dismay rose up from the casino floor. No one had any money riding on *France*!

"All bets are off!"

"The hell they are! They didn't hit Israel, did they?"

"But they didn't hit Mecca either!"

"Fork over!"

"Pay up!"

"Screw you!"

"Tu madre tambien!"

Only Pyotr Ivanovich displayed admirable Slavic stoicism during this unseemly tumult. There he sat, silent and imperturbable, as fistfights broke out among the gamblers, and the American President nervously played with his red phone.

Indeed the Chairman had not moved or spoken since the flesh had melted from his bones revealing the death's head grin within, as if he had become embarrassed by his poor appearance on television, or more likely, Ivan Igorovich Gornikov thought, as if his melting gush of body fluids had finally shorted the whole mess out.

But now a tremor went through the Bulgorny and the jaws of the skull clacked open and stuck, revealing the speaker grid within stuck like an overlarge morsel in its skeletal throat.

A horrible ear-killing shriek of static and feedback stopped everyone in their tracks and thin tendrils of smoke began steaming out of the rotting corpse's ears.

"... Brak! ... Scree! ... Wonk! ..." the Chairman of the Soviet Communist Party observed forcefully in a crackling metallic robot voice. "The dialectical requirements of socialist realist esthetics require a be-

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ginning, a middle, and an end to all cautionary Russian folk-wisdom in keeping with the Marxist-Leninist principle of from each according to his assholery, to each according to his greed."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying, Pete?" said the American President.

"You can't make a revolutionary omelet without breaking heads," Pyotr Ivanovich pointed out. "When confronted with homicidal reactionary maniacs and tinpot nuclear pipsqueaks, all progressive peace-loving peoples must reach for their revolvers."

"Like the man says," agreed the National Security Adviser, as she soothed the President, "nuke 'em till they glow blue!"

"Oh boy!" said Bo Bob Beauregard. "Do we get to take out the Rooshians now?"

"*The Rooshians*?" the President exclaimed. "Shit no, us and the Rooshians are going to bomb the bejesus out of that wormy little bugger Hassan al Korami! Why the hell should we be nuking each other with maniacs like that running around loose! Isn't that right, Pete?"

"As chairman of the Central Committee software of the Party machinery, I hereby declare the extension of the Brezhnev Doctrine to encompass peaceful co-preemption with the United States of all reactionary Third World autocrats who try to join the club."

Armand Deutcher, sipping cognac, puffing away at his huge Havana cigar, leaned back in his chair, and watched the grotesque spectacle that all world news networks were now carrying with the wry amusement of a connoissuer of political buffoonery who no longer had any investments hanging on the outcome.

There for all the world to see was the President of the United States with a prostitute's head between his legs and the red telephone cradled against his cheek, and there the Chairman of the Soviet Communist Party, a rapidly-decomposing corpse out of some cheap Hollywood horror movie, with the last tatters of rotten flesh sliding off his skull and into his lap, and the smoke of burning electrical insulation pouring out of his ears.

Vraiment, thought Armand, as the anglophones have it, one picture is indeed worth a thousand words!

"This is the President of the United States. . . ."

"And the Personality Cult of the Party Machinery of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. . . ."

"My friend the Chairman here may be a moldy corpse. . . ."

"And Uncle Sam may embody the final nookie-obsessed imperialism of the stewed, screwed, and tattooed West on its way to the fertilizer production quota of history. . . ."

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"But even a corpse and a sex maniac know better than to let any little pissant who's even moldier and crazier than we are try to get his dirty little mitts on one of these red telephones again!"

"We will now bury an object lesson in the historical dialectic of socialist surrealism and peace-loving ass-kicking so that any revanchist reactionary oligarch with delusions of nuclear destiny will think twice before pissing us off again!"

"Go get 'em, Bo Bob!" the President ordered, and collapsed in sweet ecstasy.

"Overfulfill your nuclear production quotas where it will do the most historical good," said the Chairman of the Central Committee as sparks shot out of his rictus grin, and he collapsed into a pile of old bones and burned-out circuitry.

The Black Castle was spewing forth bats and rockets and flying saucers and yellow munching circles in desperation now for the little purple airplane had almost reached its target!

"Die, Zionist Dogs, die American Imperialists, die Russian Infidels, die Corrupt Modernism, die oh Great Satan!" shrieked Hassan al Korami as a huge dark shadow shape with a fiery grin arose out of the Black Castle. "Fire! Fire!"

The controllers pressed their joystick buttons.

The Great Satan laughed.

"YOU LOSE, SUCKER, DON'T TRY TO PLAY AGAIN," said the words that appeared on the screen just before a brilliant white light exploded.

Fast Eddie Braithewaite, President of the United States, gazed expansively out at Washington from the helicopter carrying him to his first weekend at Camp David.

When twenty 10-megaton American warheads and twenty 10-megaton Soviet warheads had slammed into the Sheikdom of Koram as an object lesson to nuclear upstarts in the name of newfound Soviet-American solidarity, Uncle Sam Carruthers had been a hero for a brief moment.

But 200 megatons on an area the size of Los Angeles had been more than enough to shatter the collapsing rock-dome above the depleted oil table, and the entire sheikdom had plunged with a fiery splash into the oil pool beneath, setting it ablaze.

When the mushroom clouds cleared, there was nothing left but a huge cauldron of burning oil where the Sheikdom of Koram had been.

While this made for some spectacular footage on the evening news, when it became apparent that the fire was spreading like termites in balsa wood throughout the Middle Eastern oil fields, that was finally

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enough to convince the powers that be to give Samuel T. Carruthers the hook, and send him off to get his ashes hauled on an endless second honeymoon in Atlantic City.

Anyone who was *that* bad for business was, ipso facto, insane.

It was a good life being a member of the new Soviet elite in the dawn of the Moscow spring, a life of luxury apartments, Dachas in the country, and Mercedes-Benzes, in a Russia freed from the dead hand of the moribund Party Machinery.

In the revision of Marxist-Leninist doctrine which had been forced upon the Central Committee with the passage of the unifying figure of Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny from the scene, the Russian Computer Underground had emerged from the electronic catacombs as the only force capable of saving Mother Russia from total economic chaos.

The Communist Party and its functionaries had been retired honorably to the status of a collective royal family to preside at state funerals and make speeches atop Lenin's tomb on May Day and the Anniversary of the Revolution, and the practical matters of necessity had been put into the hands of the Computer Underground, who were the only people capable of keeping the newly decentralized and computerized Soviet economy going.

There were even those who called this the perfection of Communism, since the State was indeed in the process of withering away.

But sometimes, late at night, Ivan Igorovich Gornikov experienced a perverse nostalgic twinge for The Bad Old Days of Pyotr Ivanovich Bulgorny, even as his parents had come to consider the memory of Stalin something of a sainted monster once he was safely dead and buried.

Say what you like, dead or not, the noble Pyotr Ivanovich was responsible for Ivan's present good fortune, and for the present Soviet-American détente! There was a man who, whatever his shortcomings, would live in history!

Besides, now that the KGB no longer had a customer like Hassan al Korami to soak, the filthy capitalist roaders had jacked the price of hash in Moscow three hundred percent!

"Ce va, Zvi . . .?"

"Business, believe me, could be a lot better," Zvi Bar David complained. "You were shrewd to get out and into real estate when you did, Armand. Ever since the Russians and Americans so forcefully discouraged Third World customers from seeking state of the art, all we can move are small arms and cheap old junk."

"Don't worry, Zvi," Armand Deutcher said expansively. "Someone will start a nice little war somewhere; they always do."

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"Easy for you to say, Armand, look how you've made out!"

"I'm certainly not complaining!" Deutcher admitted.

There he sat on the terrace of his palatial mansion atop the highest point of the rimwall, looking down and out across the artificial bay carved out of the seacliff when he had brought the F-111 down on this formerly empty piece of formerly worthless coast.

Land he had previously acquired for a relative song.

Ah, but now a gleaming beach of pulverized and certified non-radioactive glass ran around the noble curve of the bomb crater, crowded with sunbathers, and lined with brand-new luxury hotels, casinos, and marinas choked with yachts. Quaint age-old streets packed with souvenir shops, boutiques and fancy restaurants had been laid out climbing up the crater wall to the heights, and what wasn't a deluxe emporium was a condo building or townhouse as the multibillion franc development glittered and glitzed up the cliff like a Gucci amoeba.

And Armand Deutcher owned every square centimeter of the land it was built on, renting it out to his glitterati serfs for a third of the take.

"To tell the truth, Armand," said Zvi Bar David, "how well do you sleep at night? Almost we had World War III, and all for a petty real estate deal!"

"Come come, Zvi," Deutcher said goodnaturedly. "*This* you call this a *petty* real estate deal?"

"But what about your social conscience, Armand?"

"Pure as the driven snow!" Armand Deutcher declared. "Am I not the secret hero of the present era of easing international tensions? Thanks to me, no tinpot little maniac will ever dare to acquire nuclear weapons again, the United States has accepted a black man as President, Israel and the Arabs have made peace, and the Russians have been forced to take care of business."

"True," admitted Bar David. "But on the other hand, an entire nation has been expunged from history, and the Middle Eastern oilfields are on fire."

"As for the first," said Armand Deutcher, "would you have preferred World War III to World War Last?"

"And as for the second?"

Deutcher shrugged philosophically. "As for the second," he said, "I'm already diversified into coal and horse-breeding, Zvi, and I strongly advise you to do the same."

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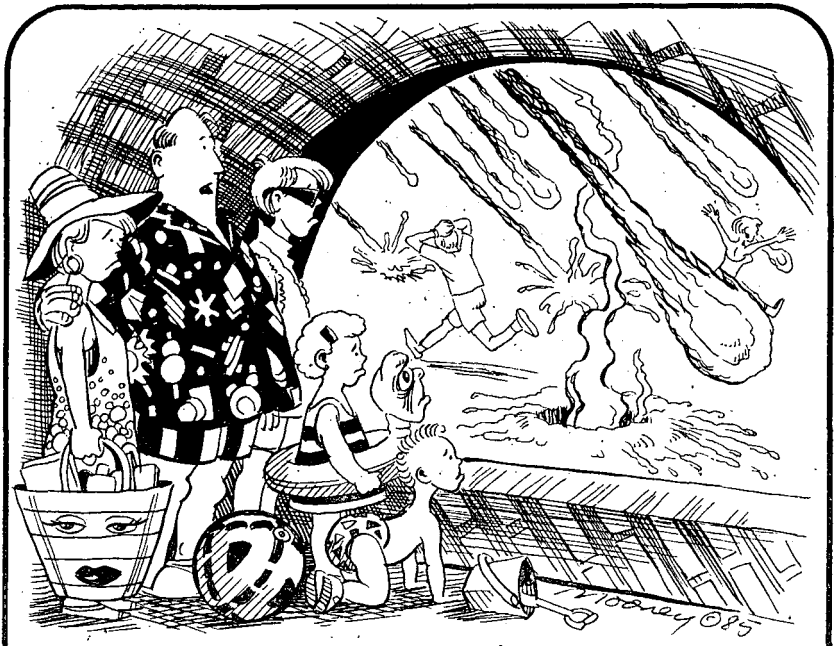

"Well, kids, looks like the beach is out for today!"

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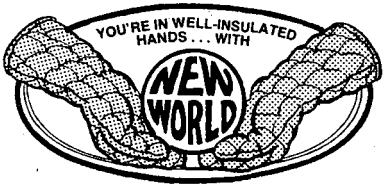

*When incurred during approved recreation periods **only**.

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MOUNTAIN SHADOW: SHAWNEE COUNTY, KANSAS

Shawnee's hills startle
with their steepness,
but no mountains, massive,
craggy with rock, rise
to scrape the sky. Earthmen here
must go elsewhere for mountains
when hay and sweat leave
for a slice of moon.

Mosquitoes whir like
ships from the emerging stars.
Fingers that ripped twisted razor
strands of fescue
from an axle an hour ago
touch little wheels
and point a rainbow eye
into pale white light.
Squinting, the man finds it;
grinning, he brings the boy
to the eyepiece.

The boy leaps two hundred
forty thousand miles. He sees it
gleam there now: sunlight
caressing a peak,
extending its finger
across gray plains.

Rooted in earth,
the man brings down worlds.
The boy holds out his hand,
and stars drop into it
like coins of gold.

—Bradley Denton

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

Footfall
By Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
Del Rey, $17.95

The aliens are coming! The aliens are coming! From those blockbusting fellows who brought us *The Mote In God's Eye, Oath of Fealty* and other past favorites, there's a new novel about an alien invasion of Earth, and it's a whizbang, in several senses of the word ("whizbang" was a WWI expression for early guided missiles). The new novel by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle rejoices in the rather mysterious title of *Footfall*, and if that suggests detectives in the fog or some such, forget it.

It's a biggie (or at least a longie), and another one of those with an enormous cast. You meet most of them in part one, in which it is rapidly established that a mile-long space craft has been discovered heading into the inner Solar System from the direction of Saturn, around which it has been lurking for some time, dodging Voyager and picking up useful materials.

This opening section is a vast mosaic of reaction to the news, from that of Soviet top brass ("It's an American trick"), through American top brass ("It's a Soviet trick"), to a group of survivalists, a female officer in U.S. Army Intelligence, and a hippie "troubadour" still doing his thing from the 1960s.

In the near future, the Russians are well established in their satellite space station, Cosmograd, and a U.S. senator is flown there to be part of the welcoming committee. Only a few people are overtly worried; any race that has got this far must be peaceful, right? Wrong. On contact, the aliens smash Cosmograd and all our satellites, totally disrupting communications on Earth, and they then invade, establishing a beachhead in Kansas. (Can one establish a beachhead as far inland as Kansas? Well, you know what I mean.)

Most of the aliens come in on sort of parachute hang gliders; they resemble large four-legged beasts with double trunks, and they're wearing foam shoes to assist in landing. What the Kansans see is, as one character puts it, baby elephants with two trunks beneath paper airplanes wearing elevator shoes, which is less funny when they start slaughtering the population.

They can't be budged, so the president, holed up in Colorado, gets the Soviets to nuke Kansas.

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This almost doesn't come off, since the KGB still thinks it's a trick to conquer Russia (the ploy involves setting off the Pershing missiles in Europe as decoys), and there's a last minute shoot-out in the Soviet missile command.

Did the missiles get off? Yes, indeed, and there goes Kansas. *And* the aliens. But . . . they retaliate with part of the useful materials they picked up around Saturn, a twenty-seven-billion-ton asteroid spang in the middle of the Indian Ocean. There goes India . . . not to mention most of the other coastal regions of the Earth. The aliens call the asteroid the "Foot." Why? Well, here's a clue. They are a herd culture, and to surrender is to roll over and accept the enemy's foot placed on your stomach. Then you're part of the enemy herd.

How it resolves I'm not about to give away. Through all this, we ricochet around the large cast, getting a multiple viewpoint of the earth-shattering events; we even get an in-depth view of the aliens, the *fithp*, through the eyes of the senator who was captured when they punctured Cosmograd, and gain an idea of their herd patterns and their misapprehensions of humanity.

Footfall bashes along like one of its elephantine *fithp* run amok; it's compulsively readable despite its sometimes unlikely ingredients and events, if only to find out what outrageous occurrence will erupt next. Some readers may get a slight teeth-on-edge feeling of *déjá vu* at the wholesale slaughter and mankind-*ober-alles* philosophy which takes one back thirty years or so in the field; like so much SF of the "Golden Age," there is what some might consider a lack of human values.

Much is going on in this novel that there's no space to mention, but one aspect begs to be, and that is that science fiction writers and readers play a large part in the action. The senator, for instance, has been an SF reader all of his life (which is why he lobbies hard for going into space) and therefore is a lot more savvy about being captured by aliens than the average stiff.

Up until recently, science-fictional types have been so negligible a part of our culture that there was little reason to incorporate them into a story, if anything in the way of reality was wanted. In a fictional crisis, the president might convene an advisory group of financiers, or academics. But now that SF is part of the mainstream. . . . Well, would you believe a presidential advisory group of science-fiction writers? Is this reality or wishful thinking on the part of the authors? In any case, there's a touch of in-group cuteness here—the senior member is one Robert Anson, for instance. (Clue —guess what the middle initial in Robert A. Heinlein is for?)

Hell, in a book with two-trunked baby elephants in elevator shoes invading in paper airplanes, anything is possible.

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Fire Watch
By Connie Willis
Bluejay Books, $14.95

Connie Willis seems to have started making a habit of winning awards for short fiction (two Nebulas and a Hugo). No matter what one thinks of awards as a guide to quality, three of them have to indicate that there's *something* there, so her first collection of short stories in book form has been awaited with keen interest.

Its title is *Fire Watch*, from the lead story. Before I get specific, some comments on short SF in general, since by chance there are two collections to be talked about this month. Time was when the short story was king in SF, because there weren't no room for real novel-length novels in the pulp magazines which is about the only place you found "that Buck Rogers stuff." Even multi-part epics such as the Lensman series were painfully published in bits and pieces through innumerable issues of various magazines.

But most of what was written and published was short stories or novelettes, which was fine, because SF was simpler in those days and you could establish a future or alien background in a lot less wordage.

And the basic form was the problem story. "Hey, chief!" yells the old space dog. "The gizmofraggle has come unsprung and we're about to fall into Sirius's closest planet which was up to now unknown and uncharted, with the alien ship right on our jets!"

"Nothing Sirius," says the heroic and handsome captain, saving the heroine with one hand and the ship with the other, cleverly using only the contents of his pockets. And that was that. A satisfying SF short story, with everything laid out in chronological order, and wrapped up and tied with a bow at the climax.

Things have obviously changed, for lots of reasons which there's no point in going into. We now need multi-volume novels to establish the complex future and alien cultures we're used to, and the short work of science fiction has had to take different directions. They can be simply incidents, in which not everything is necessarily resolved, or stories that simply sketch life (or a slice thereof) in some created world or future.

Connie Willis does a bit of old and a bit of new in the stories in *Fire Watch*, in a smooth and easy style which is probably the source of her popularity. Nothing seems forced, and there's a certain subdued humor, as if at the most horrendous moments a giggle were about to break out.

In the title story, a student of the future must take the equivalent of finals by traveling back in time to join the volunteer corps of firewatchers at St. Paul's Cathedral during the London Blitz. I must admit I was a bit more fascinated by the details of this extraordinary operation than I was by the minor

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scrapes and entanglements of the none-too-knowledgeable hero (he'd been boning up on the time of St. Paul himself).

"Service for the Burial of the Dead" is one of those ambiguous ghost stories like Edith Wharton's "Afterward." Is it or isn't it a ghost that we encounter?

By sheer coincidence, and in very different ways, Willis addresses herself to two baroque worries I've been entertaining lately. One (inspired by seeing a recent production of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*) is what happened to Elizabeth's sisters once she had decamped from that horrendous household. Willis suggests an answer obliquely in "All My Darling Daughters" (introduced by a quote from the play and written especially for this collection), set in an orbiting university of the future. It is, by the way, one of the most anti-male stories I've ever read, unmatched in sheer virulency by any of the militant women writers of the 1970s; if written from the other side of the sex war, the publisher would probably be picketed by outraged women's groups.

My other worry is for all those people that got caught in slumberland with the Sleeping Beauty and who had to, willy nilly, sleep away the hundred years with her. The very short "The Father of the Bride" lists the woes of Beauty's father, the King, who definitely does not like this new century he's awakened to.

The most successful story in the collection could well be "Blued Moon," if only because here the suppressed giggle breaks out. It's a very funny tale involving a new industrial waste-disposal method, a string of fifty-nine coincidental mishaps, a slick programmer with three fiancees (none of whom he intends to marry), and his roommate, an introverted linguist who very satisfactorily ends up with the boss's daughter at whom the programmer was aiming all along. It's something like an updated movie comedy from the '30s; one can see Claudette Colbert and Henry Fonda in the lead roles. Willis takes aim here at jargon (computer and otherwise) and she's right on target.

There are twelve stories in all; certainly anyone concerned with the state of the science fiction short story should check them out.

Alien Stars

Edited by Elizabeth Mitchell

Baen Books, $2.95 (paper)

C.J. Cherryh, Joe Haldeman, Timothy Zahn—all well-known names in the field (Zahn less than the others, but he's on his way up)—contribute short novels to *Alien Stars*, edited by Elizabeth Mitchell. The long short story, or the short novel, or novella, or novellette, depending on how you view it, gets short shrift these days in book form, unfortunately. One may get included in a collection of short stories, but apparently publishers think that the reader will feel cheated if he purchases an anthol-

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ogy with only two or three things in it.

This is too bad, since the longer form can provide more room for complexity and depth without necessarily going to novel length. There are also many classic short novels from the pulp past that are not in print, probably for the same reason.

The blurb on the cover of *Alien Stars* trumpets "three short novels of Future war." Since all three stories have to do with undersanding or not understanding various aliens, and only the Cherryh has to do with a war *per se*, three short novels of future misapprehension might be better. But "future war" is more *au courant* these days; SF war novels are selling as well as GI Joe dolls and so much for the theory that science fiction doesn't march right along with larger social trends.

Cherryh's "The Scapegoat" takes place in her "Downbelow Station" universe; in it the three various divisions of interstellar humanity have been waging war on the indigenous inhabitants of the planet they call Elfland. This is for lack of a better name, since the "Elves" have never condescended to any sort of contact aside from savage and usually suicidal attack, though they are advanced enough to have rudimentary space travel.

After twenty years, an emissary has come to the human forces. The story deals with the attempts at understanding between him and the only human he will deal with, a professional soldier; this long conference is interspersed with the events surrounding the alien's "capture," which give a picture of the war and the human protagonist on whose shoulders its resolution finally descends. Intriguing, though the flashbacks tend to be as much confusing as enlightening (this kind of playing with chronology can be a problem in anything under the length of a novel).

Haldeman's "Seasons" is the anthropological-expedition-to-alien-culture story as made popular by Michael Bishop et al. Here it's a planet with six seasons, and the small human band of scientists approach the primitive humanoids on their own level, leaving all technological and culturally advanced tools, clothing, etc. behind to avoid culture contamination. It's a worthy aim, but turns out to be one big mistake, since the native nature changes rather violently with the seasons. Again, Haldeman courts confusion by telling the story from the viewpoints of several of the humans, mixing recollections, as recorded in their artificial bicuspid recording devices, with current events.

It's pretty exciting stuff, though, but not for the squeamish—we get a rather strong dose of the rawer aspects of primitive life.

Zahn's "Cordon Sanitaire" is also an expedition story, blessedly told straightforwardly from beginning to end in the third person. In this case, the nosey humans are poking about on a idyllic world on which

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the most advanced form of life is a tarsier-like creature well below the tool-using stage. Here we have our classic old friend, the problem story; suddenly the expedition is being attacked by some very sophisticated weapons indeed, and are penned in their camp. Who's doing it, and how do the humans get out? There have been some changes; the hero and heroine have a bit more than what's in their pockets to work with, and notice it's the hero *and* heroine—the lady is not just there to be saved.

The Copper Crown
By Patricia Kennealy
Bluejay Books, $15.95

It's some Irish stew that Patricia Kennealy serves up in *The Copper Crown*. Would you believe, now, a whole raft of star systems out there settled by prehistoric Celts who took off in 453 A.D., using the technology inherited by them from ancient Atlantis and led by St. Brendan the Astrogator himself?

Whisht! Hush your unbelieving tongues. These Celts (or Kelts, as the Kennealy would have it) have colonized the planets of seven systems, building picturesque castles on every available crag, in which they sit and work with their computer pads and light pens. And wouldn't their beautiful Queen be a fair broth of a girl, six foot going on seven, with red hair enough to stuff all the mattresses of old Erin, who rules from the Throneworld of Tara and is named Aeron Aoibhell, to boot?

This is all a bit thick, but then so is Irish Cream, and this slides down just as easy once you've swallowed the initial premise and kept it down. Kennealy's background concepts may be a bit shy of conviction, but she's a bang-up story teller. It seems that a scout ship from Terra, boldly going to find new civilizations, runs into a ship of Keltia, and Herself decides that Terra and Keltia should get together ("It's time to rejoin the Galaxy," says she). They're all such nice people (even the Terrans and their Japanasian Captain) that you wonder where the conflict is going to come in, but ho! There are two wicked confederations out there just thirsting to get into Keltia's Curtain Wall, the Imperium and the Phalanx, the latter called—of course—the Fomor by the Kelts. And there's treachery afoot in the Keltic capital of Caerdroia, emanating from Caer Ys on the planet of Gwynedd in the Kymric system.

Kennealy certainly knows her Celtic lore, and gets it all in, to the point where the staunchest Celtophile might OD; there's a cast of thousands, all with names such as Ffaleira nighean Enfail, Niall O Kerevan, and Teilo ap Bearach (luckily there's a character list in front). It's as subtle as a shillelagh but good fun. Some "magic" is dragged in, there are fights and flights, and the author is great at set pieces, such as the entrance of the Terrans into Valhal . . . whoops, wrong culture . . . into the Hall of Heroes in the royal palace

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(". . . bigger than a starship's hangar bay."). It only needs Orff's *Carmina Burana* for background music. No, not Irish enough, come to think of it.

Those who like their fantasy and SF well blended, as with Marion Zimmer Bradley and Julian May, should eat it up, though it's nowhere near so imaginative as Bradley's work, nor so sophisticated as May's.

October the First is Too Late
By Sir Fred Hoyle
Baen Books, $2.95 (paper)

Pohl is Frederik. Brown was Fredric. Hoyle is just plain Fred, but it does have that *Sir* in front of it. His novels seem to be consistently popular in England, being more or less constantly in print there. But his work has never caught on this side of the water; there is nothing by him available here, not even *The Black Cloud*, his best-known title. Therefore, the republication of *October the First is Too Late* is of some interest.

Hoyle was knighted in 1972, presumably for his distinguished work in astronomy. It was certainly not for his fiction, if *October the etc.* is a typical example. Not even the Queen could be that esthetically misguided. *October the Whatsis* is a slim novel that still succeeds in being shapeless and lumpen. It lurches from one idea to the next, abandoning the last idea (and the reader) in midstream not once, but several times.

The narrator is a professional musician, a composer/pianist. (I will say that Hoyle seems to know music, as opposed to many SF authors, whose idea of classical music is "Clair de Lune" on a synthesizer.) It appears that there's a problem with a solar probe, which leads to the discovery of some sort of huge field which might be a sort of interstellar relay station. Through his old school friendship with a chap who is now an upper-level scientist, our nameless narrator gets swept up in an international trek to put the pieces of this puzzle together, and ends up in Hawaii.

Then an airliner returns from the mainland with the news that Los Angeles has disappeared. Again, through his scientist friend, the narrator hops aboard an exploratory mission, and it turns out that all of the U.S. has disappeared—at least all but the most rudimentary signs of human life. Making it back to Britain, they find that various parts of the globe are in different eras of time. France and Germany are fighting WWI, Greece is in its Golden Age, the U.S. is at a pre-industrial stage, and Russia is one level plain of melted glass.

So what does our hero do? He joins an expedition to Periclean Greece, and lives there for a while—he takes a piano and wows the natives. Then he becomes involved in a music contest with Apollo, who is really from the future, which isn't really the future now but is Mexico, that is, that part of the Earth which is our future is

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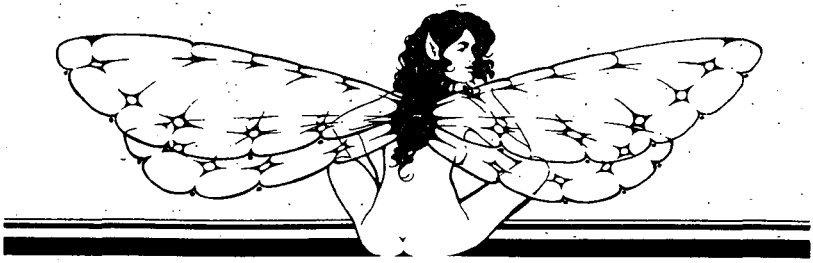
Mexico. So he goes to live in Mexico, or the future, or someplace, and learns from its inhabitants the sorry future of our present, which results in the Russian glass plain, and Mexico, and their present, which is . . .

Oh, to hell with it. I try to make sense out of these things. I really do. I spend a lot of time capsulizing plots for this column, which is hard enough to do when they're coherent. When they aren't, well, what can I say? All of the above balderdash may have some hidden sense behind it; Sir Fred tosses in a good deal of scientific gobbledygook. There's nothing wrong with scientific gobbledygook—science fiction would be nowhere without it—but please, let it *seem* comprehensible.

And above all, a science fiction writer should be at least as much at home in fiction as in science.

Shoptalk . . . A new and rather touching anthology is *Moonsinger's Friends* which is subtitled "In Honor of Andre Norton." Edited by Susan Shwartz, it is an *hommage* to that prolific author, who has been responsible for introducing untold numbers of young people to science fiction; her first SF publication was in 1947. The book contains works by Poul Anderson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, C.J. Cherryh, Katherine Kurtz, Tanith Lee, Anne McCaffrey and Jane Yolen. (Bluejay Books, $16.95, $8.95 paper)

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●



NEXT ISSUE

Star Wars(!) or Star Peace(?) What does the government's call for a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) mean to us? Two superpowers of the SF world, Isaac Asimov and Poul Anderson, square off on this subject. The result is a lively and informative debate which no one interested in the Earth's future will want to miss.

Not to be overlooked in the excitement is Kim Stanley Robinson's first-ever appearance in *IAsfm* with his powerful cover story, "Green Mars;" and, in addition to our other stories and columns, we'll have a deeply moving novelette, "A Gift from the GrayLanders," by Michael Bishop. This special issue goes on sale July 30, 1985.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Now's the big rush of cons before the pre-WorldCon lull, including the big European and Japanese seasons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the big, iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, making music.

JULY, 1985

3-7—**WesterCon.** For info, write: **4812 Folsom Blvd. #125, Sacramento CA 95819.** Or phone: **(916) 481-8753** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Sacramento CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Red Lion Inn. Guests will include: James P. Hogan, Katherine Kurtz, Paula Crist. This is the years's big Western con, noted for its spectacular masquerade. No banquet.

4-7—**InConJunction.** Indianapolis IN Hilton. M. Z. Bradley, M. P. Kube-McDowell. Play & fireworks.

5-7—**EmpirICon.** LaGuardia Sheraton. Spider & Jeanne Robinson, P. Foglio. New York City's big con.

6-7—**NasaCon, % Lottie Eriksson at SweCon's address below.** Theme: bad movies. Billed as fannish.

12-14—**Archon.** St. Louis MO. R. A. MacAvoy, Suzette Hayden Elgin. At the Henry VIII Inn & Lodge.

12-14—**XCon. (414) 963-4554.** Milwaukee WI. I don't have any more info on this at press time.

13-14—**Sunburst Con.** Sherwood Inn, Tacoma WA. Vonda McIntyre, Bjo Trimble. A media-oriented con.

13-14—**QCon.** Fukuyoshi Beach Hotel, Fukuoka, Japan. S. Kajio, T. Shibano, M. Noda, Tanaka, Tori.

19-21—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Stn. D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7.** R. & W. Pini, C. Claremont, Hal Clement.

19-21—**OKon, Box 4229, Tulsa OK 74159.** Artist Phil Foglio, fan Ken Moore, singer Marty Burke.

19-21—**MicroCon, Box 42036, Tucson AZ 85733.** Masquerade, round-robin storytelling, pun contest.

19-22—**AlbaCon, % Doherty, 20 Hillington Gdns., Cardonald, Glasgow, Scotland UK.** Harlan Ellison.

26-28—**Conversion, 340 17th Av. SW, Calgary AB T2S 0A5. (403) 228-2065.** Poul Anderson, M. Reid.

AUGUST, 1985

3-4—**GataCon, C. P. O. Box 125, Niigata 950, Japan.** Japan's 1985 national con, at Yahiko Springs.

9-11—**MystiCon Half, Box 1367, Salem VA 24153.** Relaxacon at Jefferson Hall, by MystiCon folks.

15-18—**SweCon, % Engholm, Maskinistgatan 9 ob, S-117 47, Stockholm, Sweden.** National con.

22-26—**AussieCon Two, 11863 W. Jefferson Blvd. #1, Culver City CA 90230.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, editor/fan Ted White. Guests too numerous to mention.

30-Sep. 2—**ChiliCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The NASFIC for 1985. Join for $55 to July 15.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 2500 N. Atlanta #1986, Smyrna GA 30080. (404) 438-3943.** Atlanta GA. Ray Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, B (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon. Join for $45 in July 1985.

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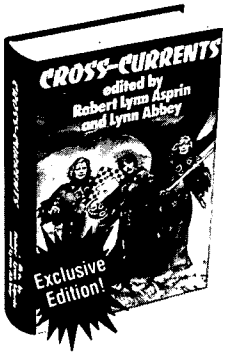

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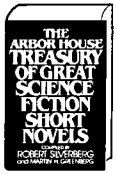

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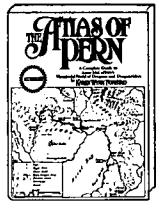

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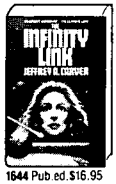

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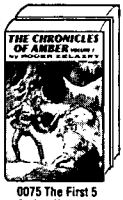

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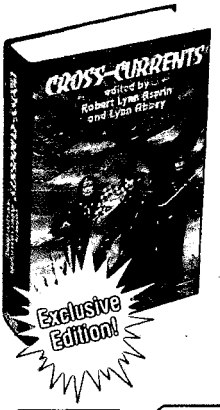

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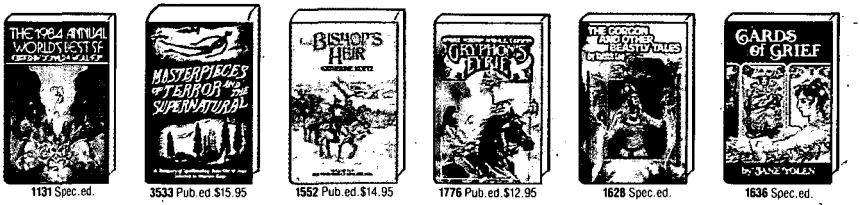

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